Education Policy as an Act of White Supremacy:

Whiteness, Critical Race Theory and Education Reform

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Abstract

The paper presents an empirical analysis of education policy in England that is informed by recent developments in US critical theory. In particular, I draw on 'whiteness studies' and the application of Critical Race Theory (CRT). These perspectives offer a new and radical way of conceptualising the role of racism in education. Although the US literature has paid little or no regard to issues outside North America, I argue that a similar understanding of racism (as a multifaceted, deeply embedded, often taken-for-granted aspect of power relations) lies at the heart of recent attempts to understand institutional racism in the UK. Having set out the conceptual terrain in the first half of the paper, I then apply this approach to recent changes in the English education system to reveal the central role accorded the defence (and extension) of race inequity. Finally, the paper touches on the question of racism and intentionality: although race inequity may not be a planned and deliberate goal of education policy neither is it accidental. The patterning of racial advantage and inequity is structured in domination and its continuation represents a form of *tacit intentionality* on the part of white powerholders and policy makers. It is in this sense that education policy is an *act* of white supremacy. Following others in the CRT tradition, therefore, the paper's analysis concludes that the most dangerous form of 'white supremacy' is not the obvious and extreme fascistic posturing of small neo-nazi groups, but rather the taken-for-granted routine privileging of white interests that goes unremarked in the political mainstream.

INTRODUCTION: problems & perspectives

> 'As I write, I try to remember when the word racism ceased to be the term which best expressed for me exploitation of black people and other people of color in this society and when I began to understand that the most useful term was white supremacy' (hooks 1989: 112).

In this paper I consider the role of education policy in the active structuring of racial inequity. Like bell hooks, my analysis centres on a conceptualisation of 'white supremacy' that goes beyond the usual narrow focus on extreme and explicitly racist organistions. Rather, this analysis focuses on a more extensive, more powerful version of white supremacy; one that is normalized and taken for granted. Before examining the evidence for the contemporary manifestation of white supremacist thought, it may be useful to draw on an historical example that helps to set the scene.

Marcus Wood's book *'Blind Memory'* examines the visual representation of slavery in England and America during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century. He begins by commenting on the case of Thomas Clarkson's 'Abolition Map'. Produced in 1808, the 'map' was an attempt to chart visually the relationships between all the important people and events involved in bringing about the abolition of slavery. As Wood states, the map represents 'a cartographic fantasy which presents abolition as a series of tributary streams and rivers, each with the name of a supposed abolitionist attached. The waterways unite to form two mighty rivers in England and America, and these in turn unite when they flow into the open sea, presumably the sea of emancipation and spiritual renewal' (Wood 2000: 1 & 4). Incredibly, not a single slave was mentioned in this 'map'.

Clarkson's map provides an object-lesson in the re-imagining of history to present a unified tale of the triumph of white civilizing values over the forces of repression. The erasure of Black people,[1] as an active and ultimately irresistible force for change, is both obscene and significant. In a similar fashion policy makers (and many educationists) tend to imagine education policy as evolving over time, sometimes with dramatic changes in focus, but always (so policy makers assure us) with the best of

intentions for all. This sanitised (white-washed) version of history envisions policy as a rational process of change, with each step building incrementally on its predecessor in a more-or-less linear and evolutionary fashion. But such an approach is contrary to the reality of race and politics in England where virtually every major public policy meant to improve race equity has arisen *directly* from resistance and protest by Black and other minoritized communities. Indeed, some of the most significant changes have come about as the result of bloodshed. The most recent example of this is the far reaching changes made to race equity legislation (affecting all public institutions and every state maintained school) in the wake of the *Stephen Lawrence Inquiry* (Macpherson 1999). This Inquiry was only established after years of campaigning by Doreen and Neville Lawrence in an attempt to bring to justice the white youths who had murdered their 18 year old son as he waited for a London Bus (and was necessary because of the failure of the police force - which treated the Lawrences more like troublemakers than grieving parents). Another notable example in the field of education policy is the establishment, in 1979, of a committee of inquiry into the education of minority ethnic children following growing protests by Black community groups (e.g. Redbridge Community Relations Council 1978) and activists (e.g. Coard 1971; Dhondy 1974 & 1978). Similarly, 'multicultural' education enjoyed a brief boost to its policy profile following uprisings in Brixton, Bristol and elsewhere in the early 1980s (see Virdee & Cole 2000; Figueroa 2004).

There is a pressing need, therefore, to view policy in general, and education policy in particular, through a lens that recognises the very real struggles and conflicts that lie at the heart of the processes through which policy and practice are shaped. This is a radical challenge that calls into question many of the comforting myths that self-avowedly 'democratic' states tell about themselves. But the challenge extends beyond the realms of policy making and policy-implementation, and reaches into the academy. In particular, such a perspective challenges the kind of 'problem solving' approach that has come to typify a great deal of academic work, especially in the traditions of school effectiveness and management/leadership studies (see Morley & Rassool 1999). Here, in the words of Thrupp and Willmott (2003: 4) commonsense 'ahistorical, individuated and often monocultural views about the purposes and problems of schooling' feed into a kind of uncritical 'policy science' (after Grace 1995) that seeks school-based solutions to school-based problems and totally ignores

existing structural and historic relations of domination. Roger Dale (2001) has criticised a similar tendency in English Sociology of Education where, as Rob Moore argued, a weak sociology *for* education (rather than a sociology *of* education) has sometimes focused on 'the internal features of the system … tending to "take" its problems rather than "make" problems through the external criteria of critical social theory' (Moore 1996: 158). As Geoff Whitty (2002) has documented, the election of a 'New Labour' government in 1997 did nothing to challenge the existing aggressively managerialist policy culture and academic research melieu. As several writers have argued, notably Michael Apple (1996), Stephen Ball (2004) and Sara Delamont (2001), there is no such thing as *the* sociology of education. There are competing (and excluding) versions and constructions of the discipline, even within a single time period in a single nation state.

The line of analysis pursued in this paper, therefore, may seem radical (perhaps even insane)[2] but it builds on a growing tradition of critical race scholarship that is especially strong in the US (Crenshaw *et al* 1995; Essed & Goldberg 2002; Delgado & Stefancic 2000, 2001; Ladson-Billings 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate 1995; Parker 1998). By applying these perspectives to the English case I hope, first, to illuminate some of the deeper problems and conflicts at the heart of education policy and race inequity, and second, to contribute to the 'iterative project of scholarship and social justice' aspired to by Critical Race Theory (Tate 1997: 234-5).

The main focus of the paper is a reconceptualisation of white supremacy and an examination of the empirical evidence in contemporary English education policy. In particular, I examine some fundamental questions about who and what education policy is for? Before looking at the empirical data, however, it is necessary to set out my understanding of whiteness and the construction of white identities.

TROUBLING WHITENESS[3]

'whiteness is not a culture but a social concept' (Leonardo 2002: 32)

As Rosa Hernandez Sheets (2000; 2003) has argued, focusing on white people (their sense of self, their interests and concerns) has become such a fashionable past-time

within parts of the US academy that there is a danger of whiteness studies colonizing and further de-radicalising multicultural education. However, the field is extremely wide. If the guilt-ridden white introspection that Sheets fears is at one end of the spectrum, at the other pole lie Marxist analyses that firmly identify whiteness as one more 'strategy for securing to some an advantage in a competitive society' (Ignatiev 1997: 1). The latter position calls for the 'abolition of the white race':

> 'Various commentators have stated that their aim is to identify and preserve a positive white identity. Abolitionists deny the existence of a positive white identity. We at Race Traitor, the journal with which I am associated, have asked some of those who think whiteness contains positive elements to indicate what they are. We are still waiting for an answer. Until we get one, we will take our stand with David Roediger, who has insisted that whiteness is not merely oppressive and false, it is nothing but oppressive and false.' (Ignatiev 1997: 1)[4]

Alastair Bonnett has argued that this position is considerably weakened by its 'obsessive focus' on the US and a 'persistent romanticisation of blackness' that leads the abolitionist position to a form of class reductionism that is unable to deal with the complexities of racism in a more nuanced way that takes account of experiences elsewhere in the world (Bonnett 2000: 141). One attempt to find a critical, but not class reductionist, approach to these issues is to be found in the work of Zeus Leonardo (2002; 2004). Leonardo appropriates concepts from critical pedagogy, globalization studies and whiteness studies, to argue for a 'neo-abolitionist' position.

Leonardo begins by addressing a key problematic in this field; the difference between 'whiteness' and 'white people':

> '"Whiteness" is a racial discourse, whereas the category "white people" represents a socially constructed identity, usually based on skin color.'(Leonardo 2002: 31)

This is a vital point. Critical scholarship on whiteness is not an assault on white people per se: it is an assault on the socially constructed and constantly reinforced

power of white identifications and interests (see Ladson-Billings & Tate 1995: 58-60). 'So-called "White" people' (Bonnett 1997: 189) do not necessarily reinforce whiteness any more than heterosexual people are *necessary* homophobic, or men are *necessarily* sexist. However, these analogies are useful because they highlight the forces that recreate and extend the kinds of 'unthinking' assumptions and actions which mean that very many (probably the majority) of heterosexuals *are* homophobic and most men *are* sexist. It is possible for white people to take a real and active role in deconstructing whiteness but such 'race traitors' are relatively uncommon.

Building on a range of work, in particular Ruth Frankenberg (1993) and David Roediger (1992), Leonardo discusses some of the defining characteristics of whiteness. For example:

- *'an unwillingness to name the contours of racism'*: inequity (in employment, education, wealth etc) is explained by reference to any number of alternative factors rather than being attributable to the actions of whites;

- *'the avoidance of identifying with a racial experience or group'*: whiteness draws much of its power from 'Othering' the very idea of ethnicity. A central characteristic of whiteness is a process of 'naturalisation' such that white becomes the norm from which other 'races' stand apart and in relation to which they are defined. When white-identified groups *do* make a claim for a white ethnic identity alongside other officially recognised ethnic groups (e.g. as has been tried by the Ku Klux Klan in the US and the British National Party in England) it is the very exceptionality of such claims that points to the commonsense naturalization of whiteness at the heart of contemporary political discourse (see Ratcliffe 2004: 115-117; Swain & Nieli 2003).

- *'the minimization of racist legacy'*: seeking to 'draw a line' under past atrocities as if that would negate their continued importance as historic, economic and cultural factors.

This is not to say that whiteness is stable nor unambiguous. Indeed, some of the most striking scholarship in this field has taken as its focus the historically specific, contingent and 'slippery' nature of whiteness (Bonnett 1997). For centuries legislators have struggled to capture the 'commonsense' understandings of race in terms that could be legally enforced (see Ladson-Billings 2004; Wright 1995). In addition, many groups that at one time or another have been defined as outside whiteness have at other times been redefined and brought within the privileged group. See, for example, Karen Brodkin Sacks (1994) *How Did Jews Become White Folks?* and Noel Ignatiev (1995) *How the Irish Became White.*

Whiteness as *Performatively Constituted*

In critical scholarship it is not uncommon to hear whiteness described as a *performance*. Leonardo (2002: 31), for example, cites Henry Giroux (1997) in exactly this way. Describing whiteness as a performance can operate as a short-hand means of drawing attention to the importance of actions and constructed identities – rejecting the simplistic assumption that 'whiteness' and 'white people' are one and the same thing:

> 'the critical project that largely informs the new scholarship on "whiteness" rests on a singular assumption. Its primary aim is to unveil the rhetorical, political, cultural, and social mechanisms through which "whiteness" is both invented and used to mask its power and privilege.' (Giroux 1997: 102)

However, at risk of seeming pedantic, there is an important distinction to be made here between performance and *performativity*: it is a distinction that directly addresses the power of whiteness and the problems in decentring it.

The idea of likening social 'actors' to performers on a stage is far from novel. One of the most insightful analyses remains that connected with the Chicago school of symbolic interaction, especially in the work of Howard Becker and Erving Goffman. The latter, of course, took the analogy as far as describing an entire dramaturgical analysis of social interaction, including 'performers', 'communication out of character' and 'front-' and 'back' regions, where actors allow different (often contradictory) faces to be seen by particular associates (Goffman 1959). However,

one of the problems with such an analysis is the degree to which performers are aware of the performance they are giving. One of the most powerful and dangerous aspects of whiteness is that many (possibly the majority) of white people have no awareness of whiteness as a construction, let alone their own role in sustaining and playing out the inequities at the heart of whiteness. In this sense, the dramaturgical over-tones of the analysis actually *under-estimate* the size of the task facing critical antiracists. As Deborah Youdell argues:

> 'The terms "perform" and "performance" imply a volitional subject, even a self-conscious, choosing performer, behind the "act" which is performed.' (Youdell 2000: 64)

Building on writers like Michel Foucault (1980; 1990; 1991) and Judith Butler (1990; 1993; 1997), Youdell argues for a particular understanding of how power operates on and through the creation of different subject identities. Through a meticulously documented and highly sensitive analysis of teenage identity-work in school, Youdell takes seriously the spaces and possibilities for resistance and subversion. Crucially, however, her analysis also demonstrates the numerous ways in which certain identities are strengthened and legitimized through countless acts of reiteration and reinforcement. These processes are not foolproof but their power is enormous, extending even into the most intimate and apparently idiosyncratic of actions and relationships, including, for example, the particular constellations of heterosexual desire that are deemed possible across race lines in school (Youdell 2003). Youdell terms this the *performative constitution of identity*.

It is this performative constitution of particular identities and roles that lends whiteness its deep-rooted, almost invisible status. One of the key points about whiteness as a performatively constituted identity is that those who are implicated in whiteness rarely even realize its existence – let alone their own role in its repeated iteration and re-signification.

In the next section of this paper I want to take the key conceptual insights discussed above and apply them to the field of education policy and race inequity in England. I view this work as building on two key conceptual pillars: an understanding of Critical

Race Theory that includes elements of critical antiracism elaborated outside the US (Bonnett 2000; Dei, Karumanchery & Karumanchery-Luik 2004; Gillborn 1995; 2004a; 2004b) and critical white studies, including in particular a notion of whiteness as performatively constituted in numerous discursive arenas including the realms of education policy and classroom practice.

Seeing Supremacy

> 'Whiteness has developed, over the past two hundred years, into a taken-for-granted experience structured upon a varying set of supremacist assumptions (sometimes cultural, sometimes biological, sometimes moral, sometimes all three). Non-White identities, by contrast, have been denied the privileges of normativity, and are marked within the West as marginal and inferior'. (Bonnett 1997: 188)

Critical Race Theory promotes a different perspective on white supremacy than the limited and extreme understandings usually denoted by the term in everyday language. 'White supremacy' is a term usually reserved for individuals, organisations and/or philosophies that are overtly and self-consciously racist in the most crude and obvious way: organisations that not only claim a distinctiveness for white-identified people, but add a social Darwinist element to argue for intellectual and/or cultural superiority, frequently based on a supposedly fixed genetic inheritance. Even after the genocide of the Nazi era in the previous century, such perspectives continue to be openly preached by some.[5] On both sides of the Atlantic, however, it is interesting that groups whose neo-nazi pedigree is secure (like the British National Party and the Ku Klux Klan) have recently tried to re-invent themselves as slicker, more media astute organisations, calling for a supposed re-alignment of policy goals and interests to favour the white majority 'ethnic' group and denying that their fascistic past has any relevance to their contemporary activities. It should also be remembered that, although mainstream science long-ago rejected crude notions of racial genetic separateness and superiority (Selden 1999), it is *exactly* these beliefs which shaped Herrnstein & Murray's (1994) foray into the *New York Times* bestseller list.[6]

Such extreme and obviously racist positions are highly dangerous but they are by no means the whole story. Indeed, there is a danger that their influence on debate risks obscuring a far more comprehensive and subtle form of race politics – one that actually exerts a more powerful influence. As Paul Gilroy argued, in relation to the British case, more than a decade ago:

> 'A tension exists between those strands in antiracism which are primarily antifascist and those which work with a more extensive and complex sense of what racism is in contemporary Britain … The price of over-identifying the struggle against racism with the activities of these extremist groups and grouplets is that however much of a problem they may be in a particular area (and I am not denying the need to combat their organizing) they are exceptional. They exist on the fringes … A more productive starting point is provided by focusing on racism in the mainstream and seeing "race" and racism not as fringe questions but as a volatile presence at the very centre of British politics, actively shaping and determining the history not simply of blacks, but of this country as a whole…' (Gilroy 1992: 51)

Critical work on race in the US has moved beyond the 'commonsense' superficial readings of white supremacy as solely the preserve of obviously extreme racialized politics. Some scholars have penetrated even further the façade of contemporary politics, to argue that mainstream political parties, and the functioning of agencies like the education system itself, are actively implicated in maintaining and extending the grip that white people have on the major sources of power in 'Western' capitalist societies.

> '[By] "white supremacy" I do not mean to allude only to the self-conscious racism of white supremacist hate groups. I refer instead to a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings.' (Ansley 1997: 592)

Of course, this is not to argue that white people are uniformily powerful, as Noel Ignatiev has argued in relation to poverty among whites; 'whiteness does not exempt people from exploitation, it reconciles them to it. It is for those who have nothing else' (Ignatiev 1997: 1). The growing influence of Critical Race Theory has supported this line of analysis but it is a perspective that was present before the advent of CRT in education (see Sleeter 1993). For example, this paper began with a quotation from bell hooks who, writing in the late 1980s, used the term to explicitly critique a central and extensive form of racism that evades the simplistic definitions of liberal discourse. In particular, hooks identifies white supremacy as a deeply rooted exercise of power that remains untouched by moves to address the more obvious forms of overt discrimination:

> 'When liberal whites fail to understand how they can and/or do embody white-supremacist values and beliefs even though they may not embrace racism as prejudice or domination (especially domination that involves coercive control), they cannot recognize the ways their actions support and affirm the very structure of racist domination and oppression that they profess to wish to see eradicated' (hooks 1989: 113).

This perspective echoes precisely the same critique of liberalism that prompted the genesis of Critical Race Theory in legal scholarship.

> 'CRT begins with a number of basic insights. One is that racism is normal, not aberrant, in American society. Because racism is an ingrained feature of our landscape, it looks ordinary and natural to persons in the culture. Formal equal opportunity – rules and laws that insist on treating blacks and whites (for example) alike – can thus remedy only the more extreme and shocking forms of injustice, the ones that do stand out. It can do little about the business-as-usual forms of racism that people of color confront every day and that account for much misery, alienation, and despair' (Delgado & Stefancic 2000: xvi)

In the remainder of this paper I work from this critical perspective to explore how contemporary English education policy plays an active role in supporting and affirming exactly these kinds of racist inequities and structures of oppression.[7]

Who and What is Education Policy For?

In previous sections of this paper I have stressed the importance of looking beyond the superficial rhetoric of policies and practices, in order to focus on the material and ideological work that is done to legitimate and extend race inequity. When judging education policy, therefore, it is pertinent to ask some deceptively simple questions. In view of the restrictions of available space, I will structure the discussion in relation to three questions that directly address the material consequences of education policy. These are by no means the only relevant 'tests' of equity and policy but they among the most revealing and fundamental because they go beyond the expressed intent of policy makers and practitioners to examine how policy works in the real world. First, the question of priorities: who or what is driving education policy? Second, the question of beneficiaries: who wins and who loses as a result of education policy priorities? And finally, the question of outcomes: what are the effects of policy? I will address each question in turn.

Priority

As several studies have shown, over the last half-century issues of racism, 'race relations' and 'race' equity have featured differently in education policy. From early post-War ignorance and neglect (Lynch 1986), through periods of overt assimilationist and integrationist policies (Mullard 1982; Tomlinson 1977), it has been clear that, although the particular measures meant to address ethnic diversity have changed from time to time, one constant feature has been a place on the margins of education policy. Superficially there have been significant changes. For example, during much of the 1980s and 1990s successive Conservative administrations - reflecting Margaret Thatcher's famous assertion that there is 'no such thing as society' (Thatcher 1993: 626) - insisted that the only fair approach was a 'colour-blind' perspective that denied any legitimacy to group-based analyses and claims. John Major, who succeeded Thatcher as Prime Minister, asserted:

> 'Life is lived, people join in, people belong. Darkness, lightness – that's a difference losing significance with every day crossed off the calender … Few things would inflame racial tension more than trying to bias systems in favour of one colour – a reverse discrimination that fuels resentment. An artificial

> bias would damage the harmony we treasure. Equality under the law – yes; equality of opportunity and reward – yes. These promote harmony. Policy must be colour blind – it must just tackle disadvantage. Faced by British citizens, whatever their background might be.' (Major 1997: 6-7).

Major's determination to refuse the significance of raced inequality (reducing 'race' to 'darkness' and 'lightness') was highly significant. The sub-text of his attack on '[a]n artificial bias' would seem to have been an acceptance of some form of non-artificial (natural?) bias. In a stark reversal of this language, Tony Blair's incoming 'New Labour' administration of 1997 openly named race inequity as an unacceptable feature of the education system and even cited critical research that had raised questions about teachers' role in producing raced inequities in school (DfEE 1997). Unfortunately, the tangible outcomes of this approach have mostly concerned granting funding to a handful of minority ethnic schools on the basis of a distinctive religious identity, e.g. creating the first state-funded Muslim schools (see Gillborn 1998 & 2001; Figueroa 2004).

A particularly stark indicator of the place of race equity in contemporary education policy is provided by the Department for Education's *'five year strategy'* published amid a flurry of publicity in the summer of 2004. Running to more than 100 pages, the document set out Labour's proposals for the next five years of education policy. 'Minority ethnic' pupils are granted a single mention in the text; a 25 word paragraph headed '*low achieving minority ethnic groups*' (DfES 2004: 60). The word 'racism' does not appear at all; neither do the more santized concepts of 'prejudice' and 'discrimination'. In contrast, 'business' and 'businesses' appear 36 times, and 'standards' appears on 65 separate occasions: the latter equates to an average reiteration of 'standards' once every page and a half. Clearly, the five year strategy prioritized an official version of 'standards' in education, but one could legitimately ask 'standards for whom'?

Regardless of the political persuasion of the incumbent political party, therefore, race equity has constantly to fight for legitimacy as a significant topic for education policy makers. This is a key part of the way in which education policy is implicated in white supremacy.

Beneficiaries

Since 1988 education policy in England, under both Conservative and Labour governments, has been driven by the assertion that 'standards' are too low and must be raised. The dominant measure of standards has been through crude quantitative data, in particular, students' performance in high-stakes tests conducted at the end of their primary and secondary education. These data are published nationally in tabular form and provide a misleading, but easily reproduced, guide to school 'standards'.[8] These reforms have fundamentally altered how schools operate, placing a premium on those subjects that will count in the school tests [9] and leading to increased selection and separation of students who are thought to be 'academic' in secondary schools (more on this below).

A good performance in the official statistics is extremely important for schools: continual 'under-performance' can trigger a range of sanctions including, ultimately, school closure. Not surprisingly, therefore, the proportion of 16 year-olds attaining the requisite five 'higher grade passes' in their high-stakes examinations has consistently risen since the late 1980s. However, students of minority ethnic backgrounds have not always shared equally in these gains.[10] In fact, of the five principal ethnic categories monitored continuously since the late 1980s, only one group – whites – have enjoyed consistent year-on-year improvement. The proportion of whites attaining the 'benchmark' level (at least five higher grade passes) has risen from 30% in 1989 to 55% in 2004 (DfES 2005: table A). Each of the other 'ethnic' groups counted in official statistics have experienced periods where their rate of success has held constant (as in the case of Indian students between 2000 and 2002) or even where their success rate has fallen back, e.g. Black students in 1992-1994, and between 2000 and 2004; Pakistani students between 1992 and 1996, and between 2002 and 2004; and Bangladeshi students in 1998-2000 (DfES 2005).

On the whole, therefore, minoritized students have not shared equally in the improved attainments associated with the recent reforms. In particular, 'Black' students find

themselves even further behind their white counterparts than they were in the 1980s: in 1989, 30% of white students achieved five or more higher grade passes, compared with 18% of Black students (an inequity of 12 percentage points); in 2004, however, the gap was 20 percentage points (with the benchmark being attained by 55% of white students and 35% of their Black peers: DfES 2005: table A). Similarly, Pakistani students (who were 11 percentage points behind whites in 1992) have experienced widening inequities of attainment in recent years: in 2004, 37% of Pakistani students reached the required level, i.e. a gap of 18 percentage points behind whites.

A great deal of official attention is often focused on pupils categorized as of 'Indian' ethnic heritage: this group was first recognised separately in official statistics in 1992, when 38% attained the benchmark level of success. Since then, Indian students have generally enjoyed *greater* success than the white group: with 72% achieving at least five higher grade passes in the most recent survey. This level of attainment is often highlighted in official press releases and in media coverage:

> *Minority Ethnic Pupils Make Further Progress at GCSE* (DfES Press Release, 24 February 2005)

Indeed, the attainment of Indian pupils (along with their other 'Asian' peers) is frequently cited as evidence that the system rewards effort and that under achievement can have nothing to do with racism (neither overt nor unintended):

> 'I'm no educationist, but if you examine the statistics it is certainly difficult to conclude that our schools discriminate against ethnic minorities, even unwittingly. Chinese and some other Asian pupils excel, easily outperforming the whites.' (Rod Liddle, 'It's not race that keeps black boys back', *Sunday Times*, 13 March 2005).

Much has been written in the US about how certain groups are held up as 'model minorities', a stereotype of hard work and success that harms both the group itself (by obscuring certain other disadvantages, such as higher rates of unemployment) and, by implication, other less successful groups (whose 'failure', it is reasoned, must surely be their own fault): see Min (2004) and Takaki (1993). This literature is less well developed in the UK but qualitative research has already established that racism in schools works differently for different ethnic groups (see Youdell 2000; 2003). A

more detailed examination of Indian and Chinese attainments is beyond the scope of the present paper, suffice it to say that their examination success evidences nothing about an absence of racism in their school experiences (see Archer & Francis 2005 & forthcoming; Bhatti 2004). Furthermore, their relative success should not distract from the much less positive picture that emerges for the other minority groups counted in official data (above).

Outcomes

A major reason for the different patterns of improvement shown by different groups is likely to lie in the ways that schools have responded to the pressure to 'raise standards'. There is anecdotal evidence, for example, which suggests that some schools have sought to limit the proportion of minority students they admit and to expel disproportionate numbers of Black students. By their very nature, such practices elude official documentation and scrutiny, but it is certainly the case that Black students continue to be significantly more likely to be expelled from school than their white peers (as they have since records began: DfES 2002) and that Black students are frequently treated more harshly than whites accused of similar offences – a pattern long established in British qualitative research (Blair 2001; Connolly 1998; Figueroa 1991; Gillborn 1990; Gillborn & Youdell 2000; Mac an Ghaill 1988; Mirza 1992 & 1999; Nehaul 1996; Sewell 1998; Wright 1987 & 1992; Wright et al 2000) and now even identified in official school inspection data.[11]

It is also clear that schools are increasingly using 'setting by ability' and other forms of internal selection to separate children into hierarchical teaching groups. This kind of development is openly advocated by government. For example, the Labour Party's 1997 election manifesto claimed that setting benefits both high- and low-achieving students (Labour Party 1997: 7), something that is directly contradicted by the international research evidence.[12] In addition, subsequent policies have further extended this principle by first, creating advantaged pathways for those designated as 'gifted and talented', and second, by increasing the number of specialist schools, each with increased provision to choose pupils according to 'aptitude' and/or 'ability'(see Edwards & Tomlinson 2002). Wholly predictably, in view previous research on the racialised nature of selection to 'gifted' programmes, evidence is already emerging that certain minority groups, especially Black students, are markedly under-

represented in special provision for the so-called 'gifted and talented' (Ofsted 2004: 6).

One of the most consistent findings in research on school-based selection processes is that, when asked to judge the potential, attitude and/or motivation of their students, white teachers tend to place disproportionate numbers of Black students in low ranked groups (CRE 1992; Gillborn & Gipps 1996; Hallam & Toutounji 1996; Sukhnandan & Lee 1998). These decisions frequently have a cumulative effect whereby the initial decision compounds inequity upon inequity until success can become, literally, impossible. For example, where students are placed in low ranked teaching groups they frequently cover a restricted curriculum; their teachers have systematically lower expectations of them; and, in many high-stakes tests in England, they are entered for low 'tiered' examinations where only a limited number of grades are available. In the lowest maths paper, for example, the best available grade is D: that is, *less* than the C grade that is commonly accepted as the minimum necessary for entry into the professions or further dedicated study at advanced level. In a study of these decisions in London secondary schools, it was Black students who were most likely to be placed in this situation: two-thirds of Black students in the schools under study (Gillborn & Youdell 2000). It is difficult to think of a clearer example of institutional racism than a test, disproportionately taken by Black students, in which the highest possible grade is commonly judged to be a 'failure'. We have to ask whether such discriminatory processes would be permitted if their victims were white, and especially, middle class whites. Ernest R. House has noted an identical situation in the US in relation to the practice of 'retaining students', i.e. holding them back a year:

> 'Americans will support policies that are harmful to minorities that they would not tolerate if those same policies were applied to majority populations. In education, for example, Americans are strongly in favor of retention – retaining students at the same grade level for another year – even though the research evidence overwhelmingly shows strong negative effects … Retention programs are applied massively to minorities in large cities, but not to majority populations' (House 1999: 2)

In relation to the three tests I set out earlier, therefore, the English education system appears to be a clear case where the routine assumptions that structure the system encode a deep privileging of white students and, in particular, the legitimisation, defence and extension of Black inequity. In terms of policy priorities race equity has been at best a marginal concern, at worst non-existent. In relation to beneficiaries the picture is more complex than usually recognized (some minoritized groups do relatively well), but the most consistent beneficiaries are white students and, in key respects, Black students' position is no better than it was when the whole reform movement began in the late 1980s. Finally, an examination of outcomes clearly shows that central reform strategies (such as the use of selection and hierarchical teaching groups) are known to work against race equity but are nevertheless promoted as 'best practice' for all. These reforms are known to discriminate in practice (regardless of intent) and are, therefore, racist in their consequences. These three tests of the system are by no means exhaustive but they are sufficient to establish the education system's active involvement in the defence and extension of the present regime of white supremacy in the contemporary British state.

Conclusions

> 'white-ness is a state of mind, not a complexion'.
>
> Malcolm X (quoted by Hare 2002: 9)

In this paper I have tried to construct a synthesis of several different arguments in order to arrive at a new understanding of an old problem. Critical Race Theory and critical work on the nature of whiteness offer a potentially important new way of viewing familiar issues with a fresh eye. Neither approach, however, is without its weaknesses and problems. Quite apart from the internal divisions between scholars working on different specificities of similar approaches, there are problems in the way that both perspectives might yet fall prey to the very mechanisms that they seek to critique. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1998), for example, has pointedly questioned whether education is too 'nice' a field (i.e. too majoritarian, too conservative, and too self-satisfied) to ever take forward such a radical challenge. Similarly Rosa Hernandez Sheets warns that whiteness studies threatens to become a 'movement' through which white people re-colonize the centre of multicultural education, one of

the few spaces carved out by people of color in the US academy (Sheets 2000). These are very real possibilities. But there is also the possibility that, by engaging in work of this kind, critical scholars can raise new questions, challenge so-called 'commonsense' and disrupt the assumptions that currently shape education (in policy *and* practice).

This process of radical critique should not be confused with a prophecy of doom. To identify the complex and deep rooted nature of racism is not to assume that it is inevitable nor insurmountable (see Ansley 1997). Neither is such an analysis an attack on the progress already made in the struggle for greater equity: recognising how far we must yet travel, is not to deny that we have already moved. This perspective, however, insists on recognising the scale and difficulty of the task ahead. Critical Race Theory is frequently accused of pessimism but its recognition of contemporary white supremacy is intended to advance and inform the struggle for greater equity, not to detract from it. As Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic have asked:

> '..is [CRT] optimistic, because it believes that race is a social construction? (As such, it should be subject to ready change.) And if CRT does have a dark side [sic], what follows from that? Is medicine pessimistic because it focuses on diseases and traumas?' (Delgado & Stefancic 2001: 13)

Drawing primarily on the work of scholars of color in the US, in this paper I have tried to build on the insights of both CRT and critical white studies. This approach rejects the commonsense (white-sense?) view of education policy and the dominant understanding of the functioning of education in Western societies. This critical perspective is based on the recognition that race inequity and racism are central features of the education system. These are not aberrant nor accidental phenomena that will be ironed out in time, they are fundamental characteristics of the system. *It is in this sense that education policy is an act of white supremacy.* To re-visit bell hooks' use of the term white supremacy, the evidence shows that education policy in England clearly acts to 'support and affirm the very structure of racist domination and oppression' (after hooks 1989: 113). I have shown how policy assumes and defends white supremacy through the priorities it sets, the beneficiaries that it privileges, and the outcomes that it produces. Far from being the extreme and unhelpful slur that

many critics (of both left and right) assume the term to be, white supremacy is actually a wholly apt descriptor of the functioning and structure of contemporary education.

Finally, in view of the particular way in which race critical research uses the term 'white supremacy', and its shocking connotations for some readers, it may be useful to add a few words on the question of ***intentionality***. Scholarship on race inequity (in numerous disciplines and in many nation states) has long argued that a deliberate intention to discriminate is by no means a necessary requirement in order to recognise that an activity or policy may be racist in its consequences. This point is made powerfully by Kimberlé Crenshaw and her colleagues in relation to legal definitions of racism in the US:

> 'the dominant legal conception of racism as a discrete and identifiable act of "prejudice based on skin color" placed virtually the entire range of everyday social practices in America – social practices developed and maintained throughout the period of formal American apartheid – beyond the scope of critical examination or legal remediation' (Crenshaw et al 1995: xv)

The situation in Britain is somewhat different. *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry* defined institutional racism as:

> 'The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people.' (Macpherson 1999, p. 28)

This definition deliberately emphasizes outcome and effect over any question of intent. According to this approach racism may be 'unwitting' but what matters is the outcome. This view was enshrined in the amendments to British race equity legislation that followed the Lawrence report. For example, the official definition of a

racist incident is 'any incident which is perceived to be racist by the victim or any other person' (Home Office 2000).

The amended legislation only became active in 2002 and at the time of writing no education cases have been tested in court. Nevertheless, early indications are far from encouraging: education is among the least active of all public services in relation to the new duties (Gillborn 2004c; Schneider-Ross 2003). Notwithstanding the legislation's uncertain impact on practice, the analysis of *the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry* and the language of the amended laws remains potentially significant. Finally, for the time being at least, in Britain the law has moved well beyond the perennial claim that it is unfair to talk of racism where no offence was intended. In official terms, in theory at least, racism has finally been de-coupled from questions of intent. But the conscious intent of individual people (whether policy makers or teachers) is more complex than a simple dichotomy between intended and unintended outcomes.

Work on institutional racism (in the US and UK over more than three decades) has firmly established that even well-intentioned actions can have racist consequences. In a preceding paragraph I stated that the forms of institutional racism in education policy are not accidental: does that mean that they are deliberate? One answer might be that institutional racism and race inequity are deliberate insofar as (at best) there appears to be a judgement that their eradication is simply not important enough to shape the main tenets of education policy: it is possible, of course, that the situation is even worse than this, and that there has been a judgement that race equity is dangerous (electorally, where whites might turn to alternative parties) or socially and economically (where a Marxian/abolitionist analysis would have it that dividing the working class is a good way of protecting ruling class power). Either way, we know enough about education policy and practice to go a long way towards eradicating race injustice in education (funding urban schools to a realistic level; securing testing regimes that do not unfairly discriminate on racial lines; abandoning selective teaching and grouping; broadening the curriculum; diversifying the teaching force; and genuinely acting on the results of ethnic monitoring would all be a good start). In practice, however, high-stakes testing, school performance tables and selection by 'ability' are all being used increasingly – despite their ***known*** detrimental impact on Black students. That racist measures are not only retained, but actually extended,

suggests that policy makers have decided (tacitly, if not explicitly) to place race *equity* at the margins – thereby retaining race *injustice* at the centre.

The evidence suggests that, despite a rhetoric of standards for all, education policy in England is actively involved in the defence, legitimation and extension of white supremacy. The assumptions which feed, and are strengthened by, this regime are not overtly discriminatory but their effects are empirically verifiable and materially real in every meaningful sense. Shaped by long established cultural, economic and historical structures of racial domination, the continued promotion of policies and practices that are known to be racially divisive testifies to a tacit intentionality in the system. The racist outcomes of contemporary policy may not be coldly calculated but they are far from accidental.

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Notes

[1] In this paper the word ‘Black’ is used to signify those groups of minoritized subjects who would generally identify themselves with the term, and be identified by such a term; most usually people with family heritages that identify with Africa and/or the Caribbean.

[2] My first public presentation of the central ideas in this paper was at a major education conference in England in the fall of 2003. A prominent white professor told me later that, although some of my earlier work had been ‘useful’, this talk of ‘supremacy’ meant that I had, in his words, ‘gone mad’.

[3] I use ‘troubling’ here in the way that several scholars, particular those working in post-structuralist and/or queer theory, have applied the term to a de-stabilizing, de-centring of commonly accepted assumptions and definitions: after Butler (1990), Horn (2003), Kumashiro (2001) & Youdell (2000).

[4] See also David R. Roediger (1992) and (1994).

[5] See, for example, the interviews with Matthew Hale and Lisa Turner of the World Church of the Creator, in Swain & Nieli (2003).

[6] For more detail on Herrnstein & Murray’s claims, and the racist pedigree of their sources (both intellectual and financial) see Lane (1999), Gillborn & Youdell (2000: 231) and Apple (2004: 198-199).

[7] For an introduction to the basic tenets of CRT see Delgado & Stefancic (2001). For a consideration of the links between CRT in education and British antiracist thought see Gillborn (forthcoming).

[8] The annually published data are frequently re-tabulated by national newspapers and given headlines that proclaim them as a guide to the ‘top’ schools, those with the ‘highest failure rate’ and ‘bottom of the league’ (Gillborn & Youdell 2000: Ch 2).

[9] An official survey, for the Qualifications & Curriculum Authority (QCA), found that in 2001, 10 and 11 year-olds were spending 49% of their classroom time on English and maths: see Mansell & Clark 2003: 2.

[10] The best guide to students' performance over this time period is the Youth Cohort Study (YCS), a survey of school-leavers' achievements and experiences that has been conducted at least every two-years since the late 1980s. The YCS has the advantage of using large, nationally-representative samples but it is far from perfect: sub-samples can become quite small, especially when trying to simultaneously examine several elements (such as gender, ethnicity and socio-economic background). Nevertheless, it does offer a snapshot of how certain minority groups have performed over time.

[11] A report by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) noted that 'the lengths of fixed-period exclusions varied considerably in some schools between black and white pupils for what were described as the same or similar incidents' (2001: 23).

[12] See, for example, the reviews offered by Hallam (2002) and Wiliam & Bartholomew (2001).