

# **WHITE HEAT: racism, under-achievement and white working class boys**

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## **Biographical note**

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### **Abstract**

The article examines students' experience of inner-city education in one of England's most disadvantaged areas. In particular, we reflect on the views of white working class boys, a group that has recently been identified by policy-makers and the media as especially at risk of educational failure. These young people recognise the educational disadvantage they face on a daily basis, made explicit in a tangible lack of resourcing and institutionalised through selection systems (like banding and setting). These injustices are re-worked through the students' perspectives, taking cues from national and community racist discourses of white victimhood. In this way the white students view their educational and class disadvantage as a 'race' issue. We conclude that this is an important but largely unrecognised way in which racism continues to work through a system that, despite changes in rhetoric, refuses to engage with the reality of racism as a deeply rooted and defining characteristic of the education system.

**Anti-school bias blights boys for life: white dropouts in cycle of failure**

*(The Times, 6 March 1996, p. 1)*

**Great white dopes: working-class white boys are the big failures in Britain's schools**

*(The Sun, 7 March 1996, p. 2)*

In 1996 Chris Woodhead (Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools for England), writing in *The Times* newspaper, announced that "The failure of boys, and in particular white working-class boys, is one of the most disturbing problems we face within the whole education system" (Woodhead 1996: 18). *The Times* made the story its page one lead that day and the issue was picked up subsequently by several other dailies including its more populist "sister" publication, *The Sun* - the biggest selling English tabloid. Woodhead's article, and subsequent statements along the same lines, have been heavily criticised not least by feminist academics keen to point out that the moral panic about "boys' underachievement" manifestly misrepresents the complexities of a situation where many boys (especially white middle class ones) continue to do extremely well (see David & Weiner 1997; Epstein *et al* 1998; *Inclusive Education*, special issue, 2, 1998). While the argument about gender and achievement has become the stuff of prime-time viewing and frequent headlines, however, the racialised nature of Woodhead's original intervention has received rather less sustained attention. Nevertheless, we have been struck by how frequently colleagues in schools, Local Education Authorities (LEAs) and various policy fora have announced (often with little or no supporting evidence) that "race" is no longer the issue it once was because the "real" under-achieving group is white working class boys. This is a dangerous view. It is dangerous because it misrepresents the true situation of race equality (where students in many minority groups continue to experience significant and consistent inequalities of opportunity) and it is dangerous because it threatens to reinforce a processes whereby the *class* bias suffered by white youth is reconceptualised as a "race" bias.<sup>1</sup>

The best statistical evidence currently available suggests that Woodhead's description of the situation is seriously mistaken (see Arnot *et al* 1998; Demack *et al* 2000; Gillborn & Youdell 2000). Briefly, the only nationally representative data on attainment by gender, social class *and* ethnic origin suggests that in general white working class boys are likely to attain

rather *higher* on average than their African Caribbean, Pakistani and Bangladeshi peers of the same sex and social class background (see also Ofsted 1999). This is not to say, of course, that the situation in every Local Education Authority (LEA) replicates this national picture. In a review of relevant research and returns from a sample of LEAs in the mid-1990s, for example, Gillborn & Gipps noted that in some authorities white students were indeed among the lowest achieving groups (1996: ch 2). It is the case, therefore, that although Woodhead's statements overstate the extent to which such patterns occur, there are LEAs where white students attain significantly lower average results than most (sometimes all) minority ethnic groups. This article reports on qualitative data generated in one such authority. We examine how white working class students perceive their educational disadvantage and how the concept of 'race' plays a major role in their explanations. We argue that structural factors such as differential funding and the use of selection 'by ability' act to institutionalise inequalities of opportunity that are especially pressing for working class students. However, in the eyes of the students themselves, these disadvantages are re-imagined as the workings of a system that is biased against them as *white* young people. In this way the inequalities born of class structures, institutionalised via funding and selection procedures, are racialised so as to fuel racist sentiments that project minority students and their communities as the problem, and white working class youth as race-victims.

Subsequent sections of this paper focus on students' experiences of internal selection in school (through the use of banding and setting) and explore the problems faced as a result of inadequate funding. We then consider how these issues are re-worked within racist discourses of white victimhood that present the problems as caused by minority students and their presence in schools and the local community. Finally we reflect on how these dynamics add a further dimension to the complex and changing forms of racism that pattern the education system yet receive little more than token attention in current British education reforms. In order to contextualise the analysis we begin, in the next section, by briefly describing the empirical research that generated the data on student perspectives.

## **THE RESEARCH IN CITYVILLE<sup>2</sup>**

Cityville is an LEA with a long history of population change. The area has played host to a succession of migrant populations who have periodically settled in the district before moving further afield as their community became more established (economically and culturally) within the local milieu. Currently, Cityville has a relatively large South Asian community. Despite the rich and complex range of ethnicities in the district, in one respect Cityville is relatively

homogeneous; it characterised by high levels of poverty. This is common across the various ethnic groups but is especially pronounced among the Asian community. Despite experiencing greater levels of economic disadvantage, however, in terms of educational certification the young people of South Asian heritage are the highest achieving of the main ethnic groups in the district. Contrary to the national picture, but in line with Chris Woodhead's statements (above), in Cityville white students are more likely to leave school without qualifications than their peers of minority ethnic heritage. White young men are less likely to stay on in full-time education and are the most likely in the district to be unemployed. This paper draws on an interview-based study that sought to examine the perspectives of white students in Cityville.

Interviews were conducted in three secondary schools with 125 students in Year 10 (aged 14 and 15), chosen because at this point they would be nearing the end of their compulsory schooling and would be likely to be forming ideas about their future. The aim of the study (funded by the LEA) was to generate insights concerning students' views of themselves and their schooling. Students were interviewed across the full range of attainment and from each of the main ethnic groups in the district. However, in line with the focus of the study, white young people made up the majority (67%) of the sample.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the schools were unlike most other secondaries in the authority, in that they had a majority of white students. Two of the schools were single-sex (a boys and a girls school), and one was co-educational. Just over half our interviewees were boys (55%).<sup>4</sup> Students were selected for interview by the schools themselves; we asked them to ensure that we saw a sample of young people that was broadly representative of the full range of attainment and backgrounds in the school. Most interviews were conducted in small groups, never larger than six, where possible including friendship groups so that the students could feel more relaxed and able to engage in discussions.<sup>5</sup>

The young people were asked about their views of the school, their activities outside school, examinations, their aspirations and future plans. They were also asked about how their schools could be improved. Research that draws on student voices in relation to school improvement is relatively rare and yet as Jean Rudduck and her colleagues have stated, 'What pupils say about teaching, learning and schooling is not only worth listening to but provides an important – perhaps the most important – foundation for thinking about ways of improving schools' (Rudduck *et al* 1996:1). They suggest that while students are not the only voices to be heard, a serious shortcoming in the burgeoning literature on school improvement is a failure to utilise the critiques students have to offer. There appears to be an assumption that such improvement must focus on the work, experiences and perceptions of teachers. Students are not

regarded as competent to offer analytical and constructive comment. Yet, as Rudduck and her colleagues argue 'there is an educational pay-off for young people, as well as for their schools, in providing dialogue about learning - not just dialogue about personal problems and patterns of progress but also about school structures and issues in teaching and learning'. The importance of this observation is clear in the following sections where students reflect on their experience of selection in school. The use of setting and/or banding 'by ability' is increasingly common in British secondary schools, and explicitly supported by the Labour Government. Often there is an assumption (not supported by evidence) that such selection will raise overall attainments (see Gillborn 1998, Hallam & Toutounji 1996, Sukhnandan & Lee 1998). Our data suggest that policy-makers and teachers would do well to consider how students experience these structures.

**ATTITUDES TO SELECTION: the view from above -- 'They're not very brainy'**

Forms of selection (to sets and/or bands)<sup>6</sup> was not an issue that was foregrounded in the original research design. Nevertheless, in two out of the three case study schools students raised the school's banding system as a major factor in their experience of education. The interviews produced some interesting data with students offering a range of views that frequently reflected their different position within the hierarchy:

Researcher: 'Are any groups of pupils treated differently in the school?'

Chris (white, band 3): 'Yeah, *boffins*.'

Researcher: 'Who's that?'

Simon (white, band 1): 'Just the people in the higher classes, people that do their work and things like that, they get treated differently.'

Chris: 'They're more privileged than we are.'

Simon: 'Cause the teachers trust us more in it? 'Cause if they tell us to do something, they know we're going to do it rather than just say we will, then just slack off. They're gonna trust us more.'

In this example peers from opposite ends of the banding spectrum describe the situation very differently: while Simon feels that he and his classmates have *earned* the right to be treated differently, Chris equates this treatment with *privilege*. Another issue to emerge strongly concerns the students' awareness of the hierarchy of positions within the school's banding system. From Year 7 (aged 11) onwards, the school organises its six tutor groups into three broad bands. These groups are given official titles that carry no special hierarchical significance; nevertheless students describe the same organisation as a clear hierarchy (from 1 to 6), frequently drawing on teachers' descriptions and actions as significant markers of difference. In the following extract, for example, students discuss the differences between the two classes that make up Band 1; we'll call them Green and Blue class respectively.

John (white, band 1: Green class): 'Blue's kind of the same as us, in it?'

David (white, band 1: Blue class): 'They do the same work, but I think you're the ones that *want* to work whereas our class ain't, they don't want to.'

Raymond (white, band 1: Blue class): 'No. No, no, no, no, no. No. We're thingy. *we are told*, we're troublemakers. And Green are like, we are told that Green are like, they're *better* than us.'

Hassan (Asian, band 1: Green class): 'To a certain extent that's true, not in the sense that we're better than you but.'

Raymond (Blue class): [angry] 'Oh!'

David (Blue class): 'We do the same work as you do it, like.'

Raymond (Blue class): 'Dextra. You go well over the top with it.'

David (Blue class): 'It's not the whole class though, it's just people like you Farouk, *boffins*.'



Farouk (Green class): 'If you want to get the top grade, you do work in it. It don't just sit around.'

This exchange indicates the animosity that can attach to differences between teaching groups. In this case the friction concerns differences *within* the top band (between the top two groups): remember there are two bands (four groups) below this one. The students seem to agree that teachers view the second of the Band 1 classes as somewhat inferior to the first. The trouble begins when the reasons for this judgement are explored and, in particular, when Hassan and Farouk (members of the top group) argue that they *are* better because they work hard. As a result they have to pay the price of being regarded as 'boffins' and 'over the top' by their white peers in the lower of the two teaching groups.

It is worth noting that only students in the very top group (the first of six teaching groups in the three bands) seem to feel at all comfortable with their positioning. They consider that their position is fair reward for their hard work and the fact that teachers can trust them. As a result they feel it is 'only natural' (to quote one such student) that they are placed ahead of peers when opportunities are in short supply. For example, students across the bands report that those in the top group enjoy first access to shortage subjects; are entered for inter-school competitions; and are given the chance to participate in new initiatives that will publicly represent the school to the local community (see below). Members of this group comment on the amount of attention bestowed on their peers who are judged to have 'less ability' than themselves:

Paul (white): 'The people in the higher class, they don't need so much help 'cause they're clever enough. But people in the lower classes, they try to bring them up: more teachers, for like, *special needs*, so they can help them more. They need more help. (É)

Mark (white): 'I'd say the people in [the bottom of the six classes in the year] *should* be there really. They're not very brainy. Some can't read, write' [turning to the others] walk or talk. [the whole group laugh]

These data suggest that even within the relatively privileged parts of the grouping system (in this case the two 'top' groups of six) there is evidence of division and destructive antagonisms between students selected to the different groups. It is clear that those in the top group view themselves as (in some senses) superior to their peers in other groups who, in turn, feel

resentment at their lesser treatment. This dimension of the students' reactions is examined further in the next section.

**ATTITUDES TO SELECTION: the view from below -- 'We ain't got a chance to learn'**

Students placed lower down the hierarchy, in bands two and three, are just as conscious of the status differences. The further down the hierarchy, the more pronounced their feelings of resentment, isolation and de-motivation become:

Terry (white, band 2) 'They get all the chances. Right, like you know the [local newspaper]. Like, in other schools, everyone gets a chance [to contribute to one-off school specials]; but in this school only [Green class] 'cause they're the top class - and that's just dumb. *Everyone* should get the chance.'

Rick (white, band 2). 'There's *other stuff as well*, like they always get picked first for other stuff. When we go on trips ' they always get to go first.'

Lower band students are especially sensitive to these injustices and feel that they are being deemed second-class citizens, constantly compared unfavourably to higher band peers and, as a result, labelled by the school as inferior and less worthy: 'we ain't as smart as them' emerges as a recurring theme. Access to particular curricular areas (in the subject options process) is another area of perceived injustice:

Robert (white, band 2): 'Whenever there's a choice ' they get to pick first don't they?'

Wayne (African-Caribbean, band 2): 'Yeah , they get first 'In the options.'

Robert: 'Like the teacher said - he actually told us, that the higher groups would get their choice. Like I wanted to go into Information Technology and *they* would get the choice, of who got in there *first*. If they wanted to go in there, they would get in there (' It ain't fair.'

Wayne: 'You ain't got a chance at doing anything.'

This kind of response is common. Students are especially critical of certain peers being given first choice and they also speak of what appears (to them) to be a stream of occasions where they are compared unfavourably to the higher groups:

Researcher: 'Are any groups of pupils treated differently?'

All (four students in band 2)

'Yeah.'

'Yeah [Green].'

Wayne (African-Caribbean, band 2): 'The *higher* class. Every time you do something in class, they say 'But the higher class does this; the higher class does that.'

Robert (white, band 2): 'We know we ain't as smart as them, but still you ain't got to keep saying 'Oh *they* do this, and *they* do that'.

Such injustices resulting from internal selection are described by students as hurtful and damaging. In some cases the damage goes both ways since students in the top band can become recipients of this anger in the most direct way possible:

Neil (white, band 2): 'You can't do what you want [as options], you can't do what you want.'

David (white, band 1, Blue class): 'That's why all the boffin kids are always gettin beat up.'

Researcher: 'So the boffins are the ones in the higher groups.'

Neil: 'But it ain't their fault, it's the teachers' fault for doing that in the first place. They're getting beat up for what the teachers have done, right. Teachers are saying to us, they're *higher* than us.'

Formal systems of internal selection, such as banding and setting, are frequently criticised for their de-motivational effects (see Hallam and Toutounji 1996). By highlighting failure and institutionalising differences between groups, systems that are supposed to serve the needs of ‘different’ students can result in reinforcing and extending existing inequalities of opportunity and experience. Students in band 2 and 3 frequently mention events where teachers have emphasised their lesser status and prospects publicly, with the effect of demoralising students further. What they would prefer from teachers is constructive advice and encouragement, rather than criticism that can feel like ridicule. Richard, a 14-year-old white working class student in band 2, has not studied labelling theory but his own experiences have shown him how it works:

Richard (white, band 2): ‘If you call someone “stupid” or treat them stupid enough, in the end they are gonna think they *are* stupid: they’re gonna act stupid ain’t they? But if you treat them, like say “Oh you’re smart, you’re this and that”, you’re gonna work harder.’

Similarly, other students in band 2 and 3 report cases where teachers have publicly questioned their chances of success. Whatever the teachers’ intentions, the effect for many students is to feel humiliated and cheated of support:

Oliver (white): ‘Our RS[Religious Studies] teacher, right, goes ‘*You will fail*’. Just before our exams. ‘*You will fail*.’

Matthew (white): ‘Yeah, that’s what they say. They put you off. They don’t say to you, ‘*You’ve got a chance of passing*’, they go, ‘*you’ll fail*; you’re gonna get a *D*, you’re gonna get a *E*.’ They don’t give you like... like... What’s the word? Advice.’

Ian (white): ‘*Encouragement*.’

The following extract, from a different interview, offers a further example. Here the teacher’s action might be construed as an attempt to push students into performing to a higher level. Unfortunately, it is experienced as yet another humiliation with demotivating consequences:

Josh (white): 'Some people, they ain't got as good writing as other people, right. I ain't saying me, right.'

Alan (white): 'Me. I've got terrible writing.'

Josh: 'Alright, they've *done their best*, and [the teacher]'ll screw it up and say, 'That ain't good enough''.

Alan: 'I do my work *the best that I can*; she throws it away, tells me to re-do it. And when I come back in she goes, 'If you don't start bucking your ideas up I'm going to move you down''.

This extract ends with an example of a teacher attempting to use the possibility of movement between groups as a motivational device: in this case, threatening demotion. Students are clear that movement can happen in *either* direction but many report that demotion is more common than promotion (an observation that has been confirmed elsewhere, cf. Gillborn & Youdell 2000).

Wayne (African-Caribbean): 'Sometimes people in lower classes, [the year head] gives them a chance to come up, and try and get into -'

Robert (white): '- to improve themselves'.

Wayne: '- to improve themselves. Sometimes they do.'

As Wayne's use of 'sometimes' denotes, however, promotion is not always permanent. The effect of subsequent demotion back to a lower teaching group can be devastating. One student describes his feelings thus:

'It took me three years to get into [the top group].  
And it took me a term to get out.'

The schools' use of internal selection (through banding and setting), therefore, have a tangible effect on the students' experience of school. Those in the highest groups are aware of their 'privilege' (to quote one of the students) but tend to see it as legitimate: they have earned their rewards through hard work. In contrast, and in line with previous research (cf. Hallam and Toutounji 1996; Sukhmandan & Lee 1998), our data indicate a strong sense of injustice among those placed in lower groups. However, it is worth noting that the social divisions and feelings of conflict are not limited to those in the very lowest groups (see also Boaler 1997 & 1998). We have noted, for example, that there is evidence of anger and resentment even among students placed in the second of six groups. These divisions and sense of injustice are fuelled further by the students' perception of the value placed on their education in general, and their individual school in particular.

**FUNDING ISSUES: *'This school is really a poor school'***

It is now widely acknowledged that, in the words of a Cityville LEA planning document, 'resourcing alone is not a panacea'. Nevertheless, funding issues have an immediate and tangible effect in many ways and cannot be discounted as a major influence on the realities of schooling. Policy makers at a national level have argued that too much stress is placed on issues of funding: they frequently cite research in the school effectiveness tradition that emphasises the markedly different results *sometimes* achieved by schools which appear to operate in similar contexts (cf. Hatcher 1998). In fact such official (mis)appropriation of school effectiveness work does a serious disservice to those at the forefront of the tradition. As Pam Sammons has noted, for example, although school effectiveness research has indeed called for debate on the range of factors contributing to success, no credible work can deny the fundamental importance of adequate resourcing (Sammons 1999: 217-18). She quotes John Gray's observation that although adequate levels of resourcing may not be sufficient to guarantee success, they are certainly a necessary precondition (cf. Gray 1990). Our data from Cityville graphically illustrate the importance of such factors.

The three schools we visited offer a range of contexts in relation to funding. One school is undergoing major development of its site while another is badly in need of basic repair work. This school is caught in an all-too familiar cycle of disadvantage. The quasi-marketisation of British education has meant that funding inequalities have grown between schools in the suburbs (able to recruit fully and to draw on 'voluntary' parental contributions) and those in inner-urban areas where recruitment is uncertain and local poverty is pronounced (see Gerwitz, Ball and

Bowe 1995; Whitty *et al* 1993 & 1998). Students in this school see evidence of little investment and experience the daily grind caused by a lack of resources:

Luke (white): 'The library there isn't even a librarian.'

Researcher: 'Do you get to use the library much?'

Luke: 'We used to. But the books aren't new, they're pretty dated' (É)

Michael (white): 'We hardly ever go out. All the other schools go on trips' (..)

Researcher: 'So how come you don't get school trips?'

Michael: 'No money.'

Luke: 'No money. The budget's been cut again. It was pretty tight before.'

Researcher: 'So you see a difference if the budget's cut?'

Luke: 'Not yet, because it's just been cut, but like we've been sharing all these craggy books, like in French. If we lose one or something, you can't get another one, you have to make do with sharing another person's. And they're rubbishy and you can't get new ones. So if it's damaged that's it, you can't do anything about it, you have to try your best to learn from it even if a page is ripped out. And then they complain if you want to photocopy something, it's like you'll either break the copier or it will cost too much for the school to do.'

When asked for suggestions about how their school could be improved, one of the students' most common responses is a simple, 'more money'. They express a range of feelings concerning the apparent resourcing difficulties in their school. The most disturbing of these is that the students equate a lack of investment in their *school* with a lack of investment in *them*. The constant battle to 'get by' with inadequate materials and resources is experienced as a clear sign that they are

not judged as a priority. For example, the despondency they feel when faced with everyday issues like a shortage of textbooks:

Researcher: "What do you dislike about school?"

Rahim (Asian): "Not having schoolbooks. We have photocopies in science, we don't have any textbooks (É) It's hard to keep track [with photocopies]. Whereas if you've got a textbook, you know, you can look it up if you want. If you've got photocopies you can lose them, it's hard ð"

Roy (white): "The quality's not so good; you can't read half the page or..."

Rahim: "It's really small print because if it's on A4 [the teacher] tries to make it into an A5, so you can't even read them."

On occasion the shortage of paper can lead teachers to criticise students who want to re-write assessed work. In this case students find a conflict between their desire to get better marks (by removing mistakes or improving presentation) compromised by the basic need to save paper:

Rumi (Asian): "They [teachers] tell us they can't afford no paper."

Philip (white): "Cause we're coming to the end of the year, they've used up all their budget, they're getting short on paper (É)"

Rumi: "You have to watch what you're writing and not waste any paper. It can get a bit hard, especially when you do technology work, if you make a mistake (É)"

Philip: "It depends on the teacher, 'cause sometimes, like, the teachers they hoard the paper (É)"

Spencer (white): "If you're doing an "investigation" [a part of the assessed course], you have to do it once through properly. If you make any mistakes, you have to turn it over to the other side and try and use that bit. It's a bit annoying really."



Philip: 'Cause you want your work to look like the best -'

Spencer: '- For your GCSEs, but you can't do it.'

One of the students sums up the situation quite simply: 'This school is really a *poor* school'. In this sense the word 'poor' can be understood in numerous ways - all of which resonate with the students' experience. A lack of resources, textbooks, paper and the lack of school trips act as a daily signal to these young people (most pronounced for those in the low status teaching groups) that their school/they are not a high priority.

### **RACIALIZING WHITE DISADVANTAGE: *'I'm not racist or anything, but ...'***

One of the most disturbing aspects of the situation in Cityville is the way that white educational and social disadvantage is racialised as an issue. The discourse of the white working class as victims of a liberal establishment has been frequently and powerfully rehearsed over many years. It has long been a staple of British politics, re-branded and re-worded through the 'new racism' of the 1980s, which replaced the previous concern for colour differences and assertions of superiority with talk of cultural distinctiveness and the preservation of tradition and difference (see Ansell 1997; Barker 1981; Mason 1995). At a community level this discourse serves to excuse daily acts of racial violence and intimidation, projecting white communities as second-class citizens, victims of 'political correctness' in 'our own country' (sic) (see Back 1996; Hewitt 1996):

'Say you wanted a house. They [the council] won't let you have it. They say, 'No. Excuse me, it's for the boat people, the China people'. But say a Chinaman went up there and wanted a house they'd say, 'Here you are, here are the keys'.'

'If a black person went up to a white person and stabbed them the police wouldn't do nothin'. But if a white person attacked a black person the police would be there like that.'

(White youths quoted in Centre for Multicultural Education, 1993, pp. 37 & 41)

Such views are commonly expressed on the streets of Cityville.<sup>8</sup> The white students in Cityville schools are quick to draw a connection between the educational disadvantage they experience and the supposed racial disadvantage they hear about at home and in the community. In this case the discourse echoes familiar complaints of white victimisation but takes a specific twist in terms of education. Their school is poorly resourced, unlike some other local schools which benefit from greater enrolments and, at times, from resources directed at supporting the language learning needs of minority students. For the white youth in our study there is a simple connection between their own school's poor state and the fact that it has markedly fewer minority students than many other schools in the district:

Warren (white): 'You've got to have like *É*. *Foreigners* ain't they?  
You know you have got to have Asians in (*É*) Not a lot of them come to this school, so the government only grants us so much money to spend. And the money we do get to spend has got to repair windows that get smashed and certain things, so we ain't got the money.'

In this way, the students' experience of education connects with powerful racist myths that are current in the wider community and orchestrated by the activities of groups such as the British National Party (BNP) - a neo-Nazi group active in the region. Arguments about preferential treatment for South Asians in relation to housing and other benefits locally, for example, find direct parallels in the white young people's attempts to explain their experiences of schooling. These beliefs are deeply held and find expression in numerous ways. Significantly, the views unite white students whose school experience might otherwise be seen to separate them. For example, the following extract includes two students from opposite ends of the academic spectrum: Raymond in Band 3 and David in Band 1. We saw earlier how these academic identities can cause tension and even aggression. Here such differences are superseded by the students' perceived similarity as *white* youths:

Researcher: 'Is there anything more you want to say (*É*) anything that would give me a picture of what it's like to be in your shoes?'

Raymond (white, band 3): 'Yeah. I'm not racist or anything, but like, it seems as though Asian people are getting a lot more than white people 'n black people are

getting. In *this* area. They're getting, they get *houses* and things like that. They get their *dole*, they get more for having more children and everything. And like their population round [Cityville] is growing. Seems like they're *taking over* sort of thing (É)<sup>9</sup>

David (white band 1): ÔI used to live on this council estate, and when I was young there was loads of white people on there. I *moved* right, a couple of years ago, and I came back - my nan, she lives there - and almost everyone has gone out and they have been replaced with Asians - like all ethnic minorities. The whole place has just completely changed; like Asians, Bengalis, JamaicansÉ I don't know, there's hardly any more *English* people there.Ô

John (white): ÔRound my way, we ain't got that many Asians round my way at the moment, but there's a brand new estate just been built ð like six bedroom houses and all that ð and they're just being moved into and *every single one* of them's Asian. Every one. And I was wondering right, like why aren't there any, like white people in there?Ô

Some students have apparently talked with teachers about race and racism but local white racist perspectives survive both the schools' and Black students' attempts to discredit such ideas:

Errol (African-Caribbean): ÔThere is some *hatred* against Asians (É) there's hardly any Asians go to this school, but they [white peers] say Ôthey're this, they're that, they stinkÔ- they say they smell (É) There's all these white people ð they sit on their arse all day and don't do shit, and say [in a whining voice] ÔOh, they take our jobs; they take our women.Ô And crap like that. That really pees me off -

John (white): ÔYeah but they *do* come over here and get-Ô

David (white): Ô-they get all their social security and that.Ô

## CONCLUSIONS

This article adds to a growing research base that explores how selection within British schools takes on a particular role in the racialisation of education and the structuring of inequality. For example, previous work has shown how Black (African-Caribbean) young people are more likely to be placed in lower teaching groups, sometimes despite attaining better test-scores than more highly placed white peers (cf. Figueroa 1991; Wright 1986). Similarly, researchers have evidenced how *language* learning needs can be misinterpreted as deeper seated *learning* difficulties, leading to the lower placement of Asian students from particular linguistic backgrounds (cf. CRE 1992; Troyna & Siraj-Blatchford 1993; Gillborn & Youdell 2000). Unlike these analyses, however, we have focused on the consequences for *white* students within a particular context where the stratification of opportunity is apparent to the youth both within their school (through the use of selection to different bands and/or sets) and between different local schools (not least through the quasi-marketisation of education which financially penalises 'unpopular' schools). It is important to emphasize that we are not positioning the white students as 'race'-victims, we are seeking to draw attention to the ways in which that label is appropriated and played out by the youth within the wider context of national debates about 'race' and racism in general and, in particular, discourses that project a specific image of white working class boys as failed and failing.

### **Critiquing whiteness**

Recent years have seen a growing willingness in academia to critically examine the construction and meaning of whiteness. From a position where whiteness was the 'natural', assumed commonality that defined 'minorities' as Other, critics have at last sought to engage with how whiteness is constructed and negotiated in a range of discursive practices and arenas (cf. Bonnett 1993 & 1996a & b; Dyer 1993; Giroux 1997; Goldberg 1993; Hall 1993; Frankenberg 1993; Marriott 1996; Roediger 1994; Scheurlich & Young 1997). These developments have been mirrored in educational research, especially where qualitative methods and insights from post-structuralism have opened up debates about the constitution of identities (e.g. Cohen 1992; Grosvenor 1999; Johnson 1999; Mac an Ghail 1994; Roman 1993). While these debates have gathered pace in the academy, however, relatively little has happened at the sharp end of educational developments at the school and classroom level, where anti-racism continues to struggle for survival in a context where a concern for equity can be seen as counter-productive to success in the published league tables of school results (see Gerwitz *et al* 1995; Gillborn & Youdell 2000). Indeed, even where anti-racism is actively pursued, the role of white students

often remains uncertain at best (Gaine 2000; Gillborn 1995 & 1996; Hewitt 1996; Nayak 1999; Schick 2000). At the same time, however, contemporary politics and education policy discourses are speaking to 'race' issues with greater force than at any point since the large scale education reforms began in the late 1980s. The Lawrence Inquiry (Macpherson 1999) has put the issue of 'institutional racism' on the national agenda and, as we have noted above, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools has given momentum to a growing assumption (not supported by national data) that the lowest attaining group in schools is composed of white working class boys. The latter construction, of course, is importantly gendered, 'raced' and classed. But while the gender dimension has received considerable publicity and debate, the class and 'race' aspects have escaped concerted interrogation.

Based on a relatively small sample of mainly white students in three inner urban secondary schools, in this paper, we have tried to tease out some of the ways that white working class boys currently view their education. The picture that emerges is one of considerable anger and a sense of resentment at opportunities being denied. This contrasts sharply with the view of inner city schooling that dominates contemporary policy documents where selection (especially via setting) and differences in provision ('diversity' in the official lexicon) are offered as a way out of present troubles.

#### **'Standards not structures': disadvantage in policy discourse**

The New Labour government led by Tony Blair has reinstated equal opportunities as a legitimate policy concern and given education a high priority. In office the new government's very first white paper focused on education (*Excellence in Schools*, DfEE 1997) and subsequent developments have included a new programme aimed specifically at inner-urban areas (*Excellence in Cities*, DfEE 1999). The two policy documents share many features; most importantly (in relation to the issues concerning this paper) they both affirm the government's support for increased use of 'setting by ability':

'Children are not all of the same ability, nor do they learn at the same speed. That means 'setting' children in classes to maximise progress, for the benefit of high fliers and slow learners alike.' (Labour Party Manifesto 1997: 7)

'We will encourage all inner city secondary schools to set pupils in maths, science and modern foreign languages...[we will] publish guidance on both pupil grouping and

individual target setting which we know has made a major contribution to raising standards in the best inner city schools. ( *Excellence in Cities*, DfEE 1999).

As we have noted above, this conviction that setting benefits students across the range of attainments runs contrary to the best available evidence from Britain and the US. The majority of relevant research suggests no overall improvement in attainment. While some students at the top end may attain higher than predicted results, this is often outweighed by the lesser attainments of their peers placed in lower parts of the hierarchy. The situation is worsened by the social costs of increased disillusionment and social polarization as minority and working class students are typically over-represented in the lower groups (cf. CRE 1992; Gillborn & Youdell 2000; Hatcher 1997; Hallam & Toutounji 1996; Oakes 1990; Slavin 1996; Sukhnandan & Lee 1998). Some of these costs are visible in the data we have reported. Although the racialization of selection in Cityville is somewhat different to the patterns reported elsewhere (with white students finding themselves concentrated in poor schools and lowly teaching groups) the consequences in terms of unrest and 'racial' tension are clear to see.

The Cityville data are especially important in illuminating the dangers involved in one of New Labour's favourite sound-bites, i.e. that 'standards' are more important than 'structures' - a view stressed in the 1997 manifesto and repeated frequently by David Blunkett (New Labour's first secretary of state for education) (cf. Whitty 1998). Labour has made a great deal of its commitment to improving educational attainment, especially in 'disadvantaged' areas (witness *Excellence in Cities*, DfEE 1999). For all the targeting of 'disadvantaged' areas and people, however, no clear definitions are ever offered. 'Disadvantage' is positioned differently in different texts and often the problems are projected as a matter of deficit in the people suffering the disadvantage. In Labour's first education white paper, for example, there is no explicit mention of social class. Rather, 'disadvantage' and 'the disadvantaged' are mentioned frequently, usually in a way that projects *them* as the problem (cf. Gillborn 1998; Vincent & Tomlinson 1997).<sup>10</sup> But in relation to the use of setting, banding and other forms of internal selection, we have an example of structure that most clearly matters a great deal. In their attempts to raise standards of attainment that will be recorded in the annually published school leagues tables, schools are increasingly using structural devices (especially setting) which institutionalise differences in opportunity and have markedly negative effects in social terms. The Cityville data add a new dimension to previous critiques in suggesting that under certain conditions white

working class students can find themselves separated out and viewing the experience through racialised lens.

### **White working class boys, racism and anti-racism: policy & practice**

In the immediate aftermath of *the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry* (Macpherson 1999) there was a great deal of talk about racism in society and the need for concerted anti-racist moves to combat it. A few weeks after the report was published the Office for Standards in Education (England's official schools inspectorate) made headlines with a report showing the systematic failure of many schools and LEAs to seriously address 'race' inequalities (Ofsted 1999). Unfortunately, just a few months later, the momentum that had built up was dissipated amid union leaders' complaints about unfair attacks on the profession and a Government content to point to 'citizenship' lessons as its main anti-racist thrust in education (see Blair *et al* 1999). Our data on Cityville show the complexity of the situation exposed by the Lawrence Inquiry and inadequacy of current education policy.

Our data show that any concern with 'boys' underachievement' must adopt a more nuanced understanding in relation to 'race' and ethnicity. The current debate seems rarely to engage with ethnicity, with the marked exceptions of white and Black (African-Caribbean) young men who are frequently cited as the 'worst' (i.e. most 'under-achieving') groups (see Epstein *et al* 1998; Sewell 1998). Both groups are commonly projected as experiencing some kind of crisis of masculinity, a discourse that positions the young men themselves as the problem. But both groups are over-represented in low teaching groups in selective school contexts. Black students recognise the racialised nature of this exclusion and have been documented resisting in numerous ways (see Mirza 1992; Sewell 1997; Wright 1986). The white working class boys of Cityville are bringing a similarly 'racialised' understanding to their own predicament; unfortunately, rather than resisting institutionalised racism, these boys are misreading their situation and fuelling the more vicious and crude side of the racist mechanisms at work more widely in society. The white working class boys of Cityville are condemned to low teaching groups through the operation of class-bias and socio-economic structures of oppression: they are not victims of racism. That they view their situation as a sign of anti-white racism in the locale is a devastating testimony to the power and complexity of racism - a factor that has yet to be addressed in the education system post-Lawrence.

'Race', class and gender always articulate with each other. The particular consequences of these articulations are complex, changing and often unpredictable. In this paper we have

scratched the surface of the various dimensions that operate around the discursive construct (in policy and practice) of the 'white working class boy'. We have explored the boys' perspectives about their schooling and shown how their experience of inequitable treatment has been racialised within their subculture to project themselves as 'race' victims. These feelings draw strength from the inequalities of opportunity that crystallise around their schools' use of internal selection (such as banding and setting). This suggests that one of the key strategies that is currently proposed by government as a means of raising these boys' attainments will not only fail to do so, but will pour yet more fuel on the racism that smoulders in so many urban locations such as Cityville.

### **Key to Transcripts**

<i>italics</i> in quotation	Denotes emphasis in the original.
...	Pause.
(...)	Speech has been edited out.
[square brackets]	Additional information for sake of clarity.

### **Notes**



1 We are not questioning the fact that white working class boys suffer considerable inequalities of opportunity. Our concern here is to examine the way that inequity is reconceptualised and used in policy-, teacher- and student-perspectives.

2 All names of people, schools and the local authority itself are pseudonyms.

3 Ideally we would have liked to interview a range of teachers but the LEA's concern was to focus on student perspectives. The research, therefore, was restricted to exploring the young people's views without reference to their teachers' accounts of the same incidents or issues.

4 The research was equally concerned with the views of girls and boys: in this analysis, however, we focus especially on the latter so as to understand some of the interconnections between gender, 'race' and class factors in the students' positioning within dominant discourses about white working boys.

5 The project was based in the Health & Education Research Unit at the University of London, Institute of Education. The interviews were designed and conducted by David Gillborn, Tony Green and Deborah Youdell.

6 British schools are increasingly adopting a range of grouping strategies, often with no clear agreement about appropriate titles and techniques from one context to another (see Ireson 1999). Nevertheless, historically there are broadly three systems that have been most commonly adopted as a means of grouping 'by ability': *streaming*, *banding* and *setting*. The former describes a situation where students are placed in strictly hierarchical teaching groups that are used across the curriculum. In banded contexts a year group might consist of five or six teaching groups where two are judged as equal in the 'top' band, with another two groups of roughly equal merit forming a second band, with one or two remaining groups in the final band (for example see Ball 1981). Setting, which is currently enjoying a marked increase in popularity, involves students being placed in different teaching groups for particular subjects (see Hallam 1999).

7 The fanciful nature of this assertion is exposed by the catalogue of police racism and incompetence documented in the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry (Macpherson 1999). Significantly, however, exactly this same argument subsequently surfaced in the media and the House of Commons as Conservative politicians argued that (post-Lawrence) the police were afraid to prosecute Black people with their former vigour. Speaking in a debate on the policing of London, for example, Michael Howard (a former Conservative Home Secretary) stated that 'we must not throw out the baby with the bath water. In seeking to eradicate any traces of racism ... we must be careful not to inhibit the police in their use of the powers that they need to tackle crime effectively. We should not allow the police to be burdened with spurious responsibilities, which may interfere with a sensible ordering of their priorities' (*Hansard*, Debates for 16 July 1999, col. 716).

8 We wish to emphasize that our data were not gathered in the same location as the study reported by the Centre for Multicultural Education (1993) which is not anonymised.

<sup>9</sup> This student's distinction between different minority groups might puzzle some readers. In this case Raymond asserts that both white and Black residents lose out to 'Asian people'. In fact, this kind of differential labelling is commonly found in multi-ethnic urban youth cultures. For one of the most detailed and revealing studies in this field see Back (1996).

<sup>10</sup> A clear example of this theme was David Blunkett's 'mid-term progress check' which trumpeted a range of measures to help 'the disadvantaged' but based them on the premise that such people would have to meet new responsibilities and face sanctions amid a policy founded on the principle of 'something for something' (Blunkett 1999: 20-21).