Coincidence or Conspiracy?
Whiteness, Policy and the Persistence of the Black/White
Achievement Gap

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Abstract
Adopting an approach shaped by critical race theory (CRT) the paper proposes a radical analysis of the nature of race inequality in the English educational system. Focusing on the relative achievements of White school leavers and their Black (African Caribbean) peers, it is argued that long standing Black/White inequalities have been obscured by a disproportionate focus on students in receipt of free school meals (FSM). Simultaneously the media increasingly present Whites as race victims, re-centring the interests of White people in popular discourse, while Government announcements create a false image of dramatic improvements in minority achievement through a form of 'gap talk' that disguises the deep-seated and persistent nature of race inequality. The paper concludes by reviewing the key elements that define the current situation and notes that they fit the essential characteristics used in law to identify the operation of a conspiracy. It is argued that conceiving the racism that saturates the system in terms of a conspiracy has a number of advantages, not least the insight it provides into the workings of Whiteness as a fundamental driver of social policy.

INTRODUCTION

> *White audience member*:   "The problem with talking about a conspiracy is that you could breed a culture of paranoia."
>
> *DG*:   "Paranoia? You mean Black people might start to think the school system doesn't treat them fairly? Do you think there are many Black kids or parents who haven't worked that out yet?"[1]

This paper is based on the *Educational Review* Guest Lecture which I gave at Birmingham University in October 2007. Antiracist researchers are frequently told that their interests are too specialized (sometimes 'too political') for a generic event such as a prestigious annual lecture and so I would like to record my thanks to the editorial team at the journal, especially Deirdre Martin the editor, and to the publisher Routledge, for the opportunity to address these issues in such a context.

In this paper I consider the role of racism in the education system. Because of the limits of space, I focus on the achievements and experiences of 'Black' students; by which I mean young people who would identify with family origins in Black Africa and/or the Caribbean.[2] In particular, I examine the following questions: first, I look at the claims that White working class boys are now *the* pressing issue for education. I analyse the facts of the case and show how a version of reality is constructed in the media that serves to present Whites as victims and erase racism from the agenda. Second, I examine how politicians talk about race inequality and, in particular, how the selective use of statistics serves to systematically misrepresent the true nature and extent of race inequality. Finally, I conclude by reviewing the wider picture and offering a new model of how racism operates through the education system. The analysis highlights the extent of racist processes across the system and foregrounds the dialectical relationship between individual actors and a regime of White interests that dominates policy and practice.

WHITE WORKING CLASS BOYS: THE CONSTRUCTION OF NEW RACE VICTIMS

For more than a decade discussions of educational inequality in England have given a prominent role to the experiences and achievements of boys. A variety of studies have sought to quantify and understand the generally higher average achievements of girls at the age of 16, marking the end of compulsory schooling (see for example Arnot *et al* 1998). Feminist researchers have been especially critical of the way that boys are often viewed as a homogeneous group, ignoring differences in social class and ethnic origin (Archer & Francis 2007; Arnot *et al* 1999; Epstein *et al* 1998; Youdell 2006). Since the mid 2000s a particular focus of popular discourse (in radio, TV and newspaper coverage) has been White *working class* boys. The following headlines, for example, are drawn from a selection of national daily newspapers:

> School low achievers are white and British
> *The Times*, 22 June 2007

White boys 'are being left behind' by education system
Daily Mail, 22 June 2007

White boys 'let down by education system'
Daily Telegraph, 22 June 2007

Deprived white boys 'low achievers'
Daily Express, 22 June 2007

White working-class boys are the worst performers in school
Independent, 22 June 2007

Half school 'failures' are white working-class boys, says report
The Guardian, 22 June 2007

As someone who grew up as a White working-class boy I'm well aware of the need to improve how this group are treated in school but a focus on this specific constellation of race-class-gender identities is not necessarily as progressive as it might sound. The newspaper headlines (above) relate to a report on low educational achievement (Cassen & Kingdon 2007) and repeat a focus that resurfaces at regular intervals whenever statistics are published on low achievement. This focus is familiar to anyone who works on race equality: it characterizes media debates on the issue and has become a feature of almost every discussion with education professionals on the issue. Whenever I raise *race/racism* as an issue, someone (usually a White person) will announce that 'the biggest problem is White working class boys'. Before considering the statistics behind these kinds of debate, I want first to examine the public discourse of White failure because it has important and destructive consequences educationally, politically and socially.

This is how a leading daily newspaper reported the publication of official statistics on GCSE attainment:

> **White boys falling behind**
> *White, working-class boys have the worst GCSE results*
>
> … Just 24 per cent of disadvantaged white boys now leave school with five or more good GCSEs.
>   This compares with 33.7 per cent for black African boys from similar low-income households.
>   There were fears last night that the figures could hand votes to the far-Right British National Party because additional funding is available to help children from ethnic minorities. (*Daily Mail,* 13 January 2007)

There are several things to consider here. First, the misleading assertion that 'additional funding is available to help children from ethnic minorities': in fact, local authorities (LAs) and schools have to *bid* for dedicated funding towards minority education projects: the additional funds are not simply handed out, automatically privileging minoritized children as the story would seem to suggest. Second, the story

argues that the results could fuel support for extreme political parties like the British National Party (BNP). This repeats a line of argument that has featured in British political discourse since the late 1950s – when riots by White racists led to the first major immigration controls (Ramdin 1987). By warning of the danger of inflaming support for racist parties, what actually happens is that politicians and commentators invoke the threat of racist violence as a means of disciplining calls for greater race equality. This can be seen clearly in the following quotation from the specialist educational press:

> Cameron Watt, deputy director of the Centre for Social Justice and a key figure involved in a report on the subject published recently by former Tory leader Iain Duncan Smith, said: "There's a political lobby highlighting the issue of underachievement among black boys, and quite rightly so, but I don't think there's a single project specifically for white working-class boys. I don't want to stir up racial hatred, but that is something that should be addressed."

> *Times Educational Supplement,* 12 January 2007

It is important to recognise what is happening here. The statistics reveal that most groups in poverty achieve relatively poor results *regardless* of ethnic background. As Figure 1 illustrates, the achievement gap between White students in poverty (in receipt of FSM) and more affluent Whites (non-FSM) is more than *three times* bigger than the gaps between different ethnic groups who are equally disadvantaged: there is a 32 percentage point gap between N-FSM and FSM White boys, compared with a 9.7 percentage point gap between FSM White boys and the most successful of the Black FSM boys (categorized as Black African). And yet it is the race gap that is highlighted both in the *Daily Mail* story (above), which warns of BNP mobilization, and in the attendant story in the *Times Educational Supplement*. It is significant that despite the larger class inequality, media commentators and policy advisers do not warn of an impending class war: they do not raise the spectre that failure on this scale will promote action against private schools or the 'gifted and talented' scheme that receives millions of pounds of extra funding and is dominated by middle class students (see Gillborn 2008). The race dimension is deliberately accentuated in the coverage.

Figure 1 about here

The media image of failing white boys goes further than merely highlighting a difference in attainment, it actually includes the suggestion that white failure is somehow the *fault* of minoritized students and/or their advocates. This is implicit in the quotation attributed to Cameron Watt (above) but also became an explicit part of some media coverage: I can illustrate this by examining some of the radio coverage from an award winning news and current programme: the *Breakfast Show* on radio 5Live.

Radio 5Live is a national radio channel run by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). It was re-launched as a dedicated news and sports service in 1994 and has been described as 'one of the success stories in the recent history of British broadcasting' (Tolson 2006: 94). The BBC enjoys exceptionally high levels of public trust in relation to its news content; recently receiving more than five times the rating

of its nearest rival in a survey of public opinion (YouGov 2005). This makes the BBC's news coverage potentially very influential, it is the most trusted news provider and caters to a national audience. In addition, the programme in question (Radio 5Live's *Breakfast Show*) is held in high regard professionally: it won the Sony Radio Academy Award for the Best News & Current Affairs Programme (Sony 2007). On 22 June 2007 the programme led its news bulletins with the story that fuelled the numerous headlines already quoted (above) on White boys as the key under-achieving group. At around 6am Nicky Campbell, one of the programme's two main hosts, interviewed a researcher who was introduced as having contributed to the research report behind the headlines:[3]

> Nicky Campbell:
> > 'Isn't the problem that - the race relations industry has, some would argue, *compartmentalized* people. And if we had *less* concentration on race, more on *individuals*, we took colour out of the equation: it wouldn't be "oh Black boys do this, white boys do that, Chinese boys do this, Asian "- it should just be looking at children *as individuals*. Isn't race part of the problem here in a sense?'

> Interviewee (a member of the research team):
> > 'Yes you do have to look at children as individuals but, but this kind of research does actually *show* erm that people from different cultures are having different experiences…'

Despite the host's suggestion that 'the race relations industry' is somehow culpable, therefore, the researcher maintains that ethnicity is an important variable and should not be removed from policy discourse. Around an hour later the same issue led the 7am news headlines and was explored in an interview with a London headteacher:

> Nicky Campbell:
> > '…there's the inescapable conclusion, according to some of our listeners, a- a-and indeed according to some experts too, that the school system has been focusing *disproportionately… too much* on children from other ethnic backgrounds.'

> Interviewee (a London headteacher):
> > 'I, I think, if I'm being honest that probably was true years ago, it's not the case now, we are – we're put in a position where schools have *got* to focus on all of the data. We're very *data rich* across education and we are accountable for the educational attainment of all of our students.'

The host's analysis was now backed by the invocation of 'some of our listeners' and 'some experts too' but again the interviewee failed to support the idea that White kids suffered because of minoritized students in their schools. In fact, the London headteacher seems to argue that the government's emphasis on 'accountability' has raised standards for all. Unfortunately, as my research with Deborah Youdell showed different groups of students have not shared equally in the overall improvements that both Conservative and Labour governments have highlighted in the headline attainment statistics. In particular, White working class and Black students (of all

class backgrounds) have not shared equally in the improvements (see Gillborn & Youdell 2000).

Undeterred, at 8am the same topic featured in the news headlines and was explored with new guests, including Professor Gus John (one of Britain's leading campaigners on race equality):

>Nicky Campbell:
>>'Professor Gus John-'

>Gus John:
>>'Good morning.'

>Nicky Campbell:
>>'Some are saying that too much attention has been given to African and Caribbean boys to the *detriment* of young white boys.'

>Gus John:
>>'Well the facts don't bear that out you see. An-and I think this discussion is pretty *distorted*, certainly as far as facts are concerned…'

The interviewee steadfastly rejected the proposal that White boys' low achievement was somehow the fault of Black students. But the damage was already done. Listeners and un-named 'experts' had been cited to support the argument and its constant repetition made it a key aspect of the morning news broadcast. At 9am the *Breakfast Show* was followed by an hour-long phone-in on educational failure and the presenter read out a familiar sounding view:

>Presenter: [reading from listeners' text messages]
>>'Somebody else says, er, "White youngsters fail because PC [politically correct] teachers and the media are more interested in Black and Asian children.'

In this way the country's most trusted news service had effectively promoted the view that White children are the *victims* of ethnic diversity in general and race equality in particular.

A tendency to present White people as the new race victims has been commented upon by writers in both the USA (Apple 1998; Delgado & Stefancic 1997) and the UK (Rollock 2006). The particular manifestation of White victimology in recent academic and media analyses of examination performance is especially dangerous for several reasons. The discourse presents Whites as the victims of race equality measures. Consequently, moves that have been inspired by a commitment to social justice become recast as if they represent a competitive threat to White people; they are redefined as a sectional (racialised, even racist) campaign. Simultaneously, this refrain of racial competition has the effect of erasing from sight the possibility that members of *all* ethnic groups might excel in a single educational system. The prominence given to these arguments and the strategic citation of far right groups (such as the British National Party) has the clear effect of sounding a warning to everyone involved in education: *make sure that White kids are catered for – don't let*

race equality go too *far*. The threatened price of de-centring White children is racial violence – both symbolic and, in the case of racist harassment, physical.

This is evidence that Whiteness is a key resource even for people who suffer economic disadvantage. Critical Race Theory is often misrepresented by its detractors, who assert that CRT homogenizes White people and downplays the significance of poverty among Whites (Darder & Torres 2004; Cole 2007). In fact CRT is extremely sensitive to differences in power and privilege within the category of White people (Delgado & Stefancic 1997). However, critical race theorists also point to the benefits that accrue to all White people from their positioning within a racist system. White people are not all *equally* privileged, but all white people *do* gain some advantage from their Whiteness: their interests are assumed to be important and any challenge to their centrality is met with hostility and violence, both symbolic and physical (Allen 2006; Gillborn 2008; Stovall 2006).

RACE, CLASS & EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

In the previous section I noted how GCSE results for 16 year-olds were reported in the British media as revealing a situation where, in the words of the *Daily Mail* newspaper '*White, working-class boys have the worst GCSE results*' (13 January 2007, original emphasis). It is clear from the data summarized in Figure 1 that the inequality of attainment between 'White British' boys in receipt of free school meals and their White peers who do not receive this benefit (N-FSM) is considerably larger than the difference between White and Black FSM boys. Nevertheless the *Daily Mail* story accurately (if selectively) reported the statistics:

> 'Just 24 per cent of disadvantaged white boys now leave school with five or more good GCSEs. This compares with 33.7 per cent for black African boys from similar low-income households.' *Daily Mail* (2007)

It is significant that the paper chose to highlight the largest possible Black/White inequality: Black African FSM boys were 9.7 percentage points more likely to attain five higher grades, i.e. three times the size of the gap between 'White British' and 'Black Caribbean' FSM boys (3.1 percentage points). Even more importantly, the story focused exclusively on pupils in receipt of free school meals but used a variety of terms as shorthand for this group, including 'working class', 'disadvantaged' and 'low-income'. This is a common feature of media coverage of educational statistics. Indeed, this assumption that FSM equates to 'working class' students was enshrined in some of the headlines quoted earlier:

> White working-class boys are the worst performers in school
> *Independent*, 22 June 2007

> Half school 'failures' are white working-class boys, says report
> *The Guardian*, 22 June 2007

This slippage, from 'receipt of free school meals' to 'working class', may be an innocent attempt to bring life to otherwise verbose and dry educational statistics. But the consequences of this shift are far from innocent. Receipt of free school meals is

used as a crude measure of disadvantage in educational statistics mainly because it is a piece of information that is readily accessible: the data are routinely collected by schools and provide a simple binary division. In contrast, there is no single scale of social class categories that is universally recognized; the categories are multiple and difficult to interpret; and, perhaps most importantly, the data are expensive to generate because additional, often sensitive, information is required to construct the datasets. Consequently, official research rarely uses a detailed measure of social class, preferring instead to rely on the binary disadvantage proxy of FSM (see Archer & Francis 2007; Gillborn 2008). In the GCSE data quoted above 13.2% of all pupils were in receipt of free school meals (DfES 2006a, table 32). But in a recent survey by the National Centre for Social Research 57% of UK adults described themselves as 'working class' (BBC News Online 2007). Consequently the discursive slippage from 'free school meals' to 'working class' has the effect of inflating the significance of the finding: data on a relatively small group of students (13% of the cohort) are reported in a way that makes it sound descriptive of more than half the population (57%).

The focus on pupils in receipt of free school meals has become increasingly pronounced in recent years. The media's exclusive use of the FSM statistics reflects the way that the data are presented by the Education Department itself. In 2006, for example, the department published a 104 page digest of statistics on race and education (DfES 2006b). Amid the 19 tables and 48 illustrations, the document focuses a good deal on the significance of the FSM variable and, for example, includes three separate illustrations detailing different breakdowns of GCSE attainment among FSM students (DfES 2006b: 65-68): in contrast there is not a single table nor illustration giving a separate breakdown for non-FSM students and their relative attainments cannot be deduced from the FSM data that are presented.

The failure to interrogate N-FSM attainment in official documents invites the question as to how different ethnic groups attain within this larger, increasingly neglected, 86.8% of the cohort. The answer is contained in Figure 2. As the figure illustrates, the image of White failure created by the newspaper headlines does not reflect the reality as experienced by the majority of students. White British students who do not receive free meals are more likely to attain five higher grade passes than their counterparts of the same gender in several minoritized groups, including those of Bangladeshi, Black African, Pakistani, Mixed (White/Black Caribbean) and Black Caribbean ethnic heritage. Clearly, race inequality of the more familiar variety (where minoritized students achieve less well) remains a key characteristic of the English education system and affects students of *both* genders.[4] The largest inequalities relate to Black Caribbean N-FSM students, where girls are 9.7 percentage points less likely to achieve the benchmark than their White peers and the figure for boys is 17.2 percentage points.

Figure 2 about here

GAP TALK: **LOCKED-IN INEQUALITY AND GOVERNMENTAL IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT**

'While some gaps have narrowed, for example, for black and minority ethnic pupils, others have proved to be extremely persistent nationally. This is despite overall improvement in the attainment of all groups of pupils. For example, the difference in the proportion of boys and girls achieving the expected levels in English … (DfES 2007: 7)

This quotation is taken from the '*2020 Vision Report'*, authored by a group chaired by Christine Gilbert, the current Chief Inspector of Schools. The report was meant to provide a vision for education into the next decade and was launched as providing a new direction in education policy. The authors claimed a deep commitment to changing the shape of achievement nationally. Indeed, it included a chapter entitled, *'Closing the gap – a system-wide focus on achievement for all'* (DfES 2007: 37-40). Despite these laudable-sounding aims, the report authors seem to adopt a position that treats race inequality somewhat superficially. As the quotation (above) illustrates, the report asserts that race inequalities are shrinking but does not provide any evidence to substantiate this. Furthermore, the report (which runs to more than fifty pages) does not once use the words 'racism', 'discrimination' or even the more anodyne 'prejudice'. In fact, the statement that the gap 'for black and minority ethnic pupils' has 'narrowed' (DfES 2007: 7) is the only direct reference to the scale of any ethnic inequalities: no statistics are offered to support the inference that things are improving for Black children. This is an example of what I call *'Gap Talk'*.

Figure 3 about here

Whenever policy makers are challenged about their record on race equality, they typically respond with 'Gap Talk', that is, they assert that an ethnic inequity is getting better, that a gap (in attainment, retention, exclusion or some other measure) is getting smaller. This assertion is usually (but not always) supported by the use of statistics. Figure 3 includes examples of gap talk from 2001 to 2007 and shows how these occasions represent more than the mere *reporting* of the latest statistics: talk of 'closing' or 'narrowing' gaps operates as a discursive strategy whereby statistical data are used to *construct* the view that things are improving and the system is moving in the right direction. This 'Gap Talk' serves a particular strategic and political purpose: it reassures that things are improving and, therefore, operates to silence calls for radical dedicated action on race equality. After all, why consider radical change if things are already improving? Despite the frequency with which Gap Talk appears in official pronouncements, the reality is that deep-level race inequalities are a fundamental and relatively stable feature of the English education system. In order to see this clearly it is necessary to look at data that relate to a longer time period (see Figure 4).

Figure 4 about here

Figure 4 shows the Black/White inequality in educational attainment at age 16. The data use a relatively crude composite 'Black' category but have the advantage of drawing on the *only* nationally representative survey that reaches back to the late 1980s, when the first substantial reforms in the modern era got underway.[5] The data indicate that there have been periods where the gap has narrowed, and other times where it has widened. By selectively citing a one- or two-year period in isolation, 'Gap Talk' provides the reassuring official verdict that the system is moving

inexorably towards greater equality. But this is a fiction that hides the truth about the deep-seated nature of race inequality: if we take a longer term view and compare Black/White improvements over a period of 6, 10 and 15 years, then the statistics suggest that, in practical terms, the Black/White inequality is a permanent feature of the system. Over 15 years the gap grew by 3 percentage points; over 10 years it narrowed by 1 point; and over 6 years it grew by 9 points (see Figure 5). At these overall rates of improvement in every case White students would hit saturation point (with 100% attaining the benchmark) well before Black students close the gap. Indeed, the soonest that Black students would make 100% (and finally close the gap) would be the year 2054.

It is important to state clearly that I do *not* believe that these calculations offer any firm indication of future trends - although that is *exactly* what Gap Talk invites people to assume by offering statistics on recent changes as evidence that policy is moving ahead in the desired fashion. Rather, I present the calculations as an alternative means of viewing the statistics through a lens that highlights the longer term pattern and reveals the persistence of deep-rooted race inequality.

This alternative perspective suggests that 'Gap talk' is not merely optimistic, it is downright deceitful. Rather than being an inequality that is consistently narrowing with each cohort, as 'Gap Talk' suggests, official data show that the Black/White inequality of achievement displays many of the characteristics that Daria Roithmayr identifies in situations of 'locked-in inequality'. Roithmayr is a critical race theorist working in legal studies, who has used economic and antitrust theory, for example, to expose the workings of racist inequality in admissions to law schools. She identifies 'locked-in inequality' where:

> Market monopolies can become self-reinforcing, locked in, and ultimated under certain circumstances. For example, in markets characterized by positive feedback, an early competitive advantage can feed on itself to produce a perpetually increasing lead that ultimately becomes impossible to overcome … When that occurs, we say that the product has become 'locked in' to its monopoly or market leader position. (Roithmayr 2003: 38).

The Black/White achievement gap in England has the hallmarks of locked-in inequality. That is, an inequality so great and so deep seated that it cannot be closed through the 'normal' workings of the system. However, this reality is hidden by 'Gap Talk' which constructs the false impression of progress. Meanwhile mainstream policy continues to lumber on prioritizing major initiatives in the name of 'standards for all' which actually have the effect of further disadvantaging Black students. For example, the emphasis on increased selection and separation within mainstream schools through initiatives like the 'Gifted and Talented' programme and 'setting by ability'. Decades of research, on both sides of the Atlantic, show that whenever teachers are asked to assess their students' 'potential' against some academic or behavioural norm, Black students are typically under-represented in the highest ranked groups (which benefit from additional resources) and over-represented in the low-ranked groups, which typically experience teaching of lower quality, cover less of the curriculum and, in the English system of 'tiered' GCSE examinations, are likely to be entered for tests where the very highest grades are not available because they are restricted to a 'higher' paper reserved for 'more able' students (see Araujo

2007; Braddock & Dawkins 1993; CRE 1992; Gillborn 2008; Gillborn & Gipps 1996; Gillborn & Youdell 2000; Hallam 2002; Hallam. & Toutounji 1996; Oakes 1990; Oakes *et al* 2004; Sukhnandan & Lee 1998; Talbert & Ennis 1990; Tikley *et al* 2006).

Despite these research findings, replicated numerous times, setting and discipline remain central policy priorities, whoever resides in Number 10 Downing Street. Shortly before becoming Prime Minister as Tony Blair's successor, for example, Gordon Brown used his last Mansion House speech to pledge a World-Class education system, with 'a renewed focus on setting by ability' (Brown 2007).

All of this raises fundamental questions about the nature of race inequality in education and the culpability of policymakers. Of course, as an observer to the policy process I cannot look inside the heads of policymakers and their advisers. It might be that policymakers genuinely believe that things are getting better for Black students; perhaps they have not noticed that successive official statements report apparently significant improvements year-after-year but race inequality continues; perhaps their advisers have not yet done the calculations; perhaps they are genuinely unaware of the academic research and community-based campaigns that highlight the failings of policy and practice (see John 2006; Richardson 2005). Fortunately, as critical social scientists and educators, we do not need to look inside the heads of policymakers – their intentions are irrelevant. What matters is the *effect* that changes in policy and practice have for particular minoritized groups. A focus on outcomes (rather than intent) is a basic tenet of any serious attempt to understand race inequality and is already well established in relevant social policy. For example, *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry* made this clear in its well known definition of institutional racism:

> 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: 28).

This definition was accepted by Government and helped shape changes in race relations law, through the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, that place a positive duty to pursue race equality on more than 40,000 public bodies, including government departments and every state maintained school. It is well established, therefore, that good intentions are not enough to avoid discriminatory behaviour nor are they an excuse where the outcomes of policies and actions work against certain minoritized groups. This is a vital point which must be borne in mind when assessing the nature of the policy context within which we seek to understand the shape and nature of race inequality.

CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND THEORIZING CONSPIRACY

In previous analyses of the deep-rooted and normalized nature of race inequality I have drawn on several different conceptual ideas. In recent years my growing understanding of critical race theory (CRT) helped me to move beyond the confines of UK policy theorizing and raise more fundamental questions about the nature of the

processes that shape Black educational failure in both the US and the UK (see Gillborn 2006). As I started to explore these processes I tried to find a way of capturing the extensive but often hidden nature of White power interests. In several talks (including to diverse audiences in the US, Canada, Europe and Australia) I tried to convey the situation by arguing that *'It's not a conspiracy, it's worse than that!'*

What I intended to communicate was the almost automatic way in which White interests, and the disadvantaging of Black students, went unremarked but was a key element in all educational policy: for example, operating in the selection of policy priorities at a national level; figured in teachers' views of 'ability at the classroom level; strengthened through the media's selective reporting of educational achievement; and seen in the way that most researchers treat race inequality as an after-thought, a kind of peripheral extra that might have relevance *after* the main inequalities (such as class) have been accounted for. Each of these problems has been discussed earlier in this paper, for example, epitomized in the construction of White 'working class' boys as new race victims while the interests of Black students are sidelined and policies (such as greater use of 'setting by ability' and the 'Gifted and Talented' programme) further institutionalise the existing race inequity.

As I discussed this perspective with antiracists internationally, however, I was questioned by several colleagues who wanted me to explain how, in view of the data I had presented, could I still maintain that the situation was *not* a conspiracy? After all, they argued, it had the same effect as a conspiracy. As I began reading more widely I realised that I had fallen into the trap of accepting contemporary 'commonsense' notions of conspiracy. As I explored the use of conspiracy theories in African American literature and critical legal work it became clear that I was indeed describing a conspiracy – though not a simple nor obvious one.

Conspiracy Theories and the Academy

Understanding racism as a form of conspiracy is by no means a new idea. In the US there is a substantial literature on conspiracy and racism, especially among African American communities. Patricia Turner's '*I heard it through the Grapevine*' (Turner 1993) is a particularly important example of scholarly work in the field. The book is a careful exploration of community beliefs about racial oppression. Turner shows that many well-known rumours and conspiracy theories reflect the reality of race oppression in the US. When the book was published, however, it was attacked by others in the field for not condemning what they called 'the virus of paranoia' (Robins & Post 1997 quoted by Knight 2000: 13). This response is extremely important because it highlights the dismissive response that often accompanies talk of conspiracies, even in academic research. A study of the views of just over one thousand African Americans in Louisiana in the late 1990s, for example, claimed to be 'the first extensive empirical examination of the opinion of African Americans on a wide range of theories implicating government' (Parsons *et al* 1999: 203). The authors note that 'conspiracy theories' have been 'given credibility by a bitter history of *real plots* against African Americans' (Parsons *et al* 1999: 202, emphasis added) but are nevertheless worried by the relatively high numbers supporting these beliefs and conclude by considering 'what can be done to minimize the belief in conspiracy theories and restore trust in government?' (Parsons *et al* 1999: 218). In response they suggest a greater role for African Americans 'in their government' is an essential criterion (Parsons *et al* 1999: 218). They do not, however, call for the eradication of

the gross inequalities that shape the US social and economic fabric; inequalities which would seem to lend empirical support to some of the most widely believed 'conspiracy theories' in the study. Almost nine out of ten respondents agreed that African Americans are harassed by police because of their race and that the criminal justice system is not fair (Parsons *et al* 1999: table 1, p. 211-12).

The assumption that a belief in conspiracy is necessarily destructive and/or erroneous is extremely strong. Virtually any mention of 'conspiracy' leads to ridicule. This, of course, is an important operation of power: the stories told by the powerful are classed as 'history', but the stories of the oppressed are dismissed as paranoid delusions. In the remainder of this paper I want to reverse this commonsense assumption and place the idea of conspiracy centre-stage: conspiracy is not only a useful metaphor for how the education system operates, it accurately describes the nature of the problem and the scale of the task facing antiracists.

Legal Approaches to Theorizing Conspiracy

> To use the word conspiracy to describe certain aspects of our society is a strong indictment against the social fabric of this country. I have been challenged hundreds of times in debates and by the media with the use of this word *conspiracy*. Many of the challengers want me to document who were the plotters of this conspiracy, where was the meeting and when did it take place? I smile and listen to their barrage and remain confident in knowing as Neely Fuller stated 'until you understand White supremacy, everything else will confuse you'. Jawanza Kunjufu (2005: 1, original emphasis)

This quotation is taken from the opening of Jawanza Kunjufu's book series entitled *'Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys'*. It neatly captures some of the assumptions that meet talk of racism as a conspiracy, for example, the assumption that a conspiracy requires a clandestine meeting where plotters secretly agree their plans. But this is a caricatured, cartoon-like version of conspiracy. In the real world conspiracies are more complex and more powerful than the Hollywood image. Fortunately, there is a discipline that has had to take conspiracy very seriously; namely, the law. In order to counter conspiracies, the law has had to evolve a more sophisticated approach than that seen in most social science treatments of the idea. Interestingly, legal approaches to conspiracy – like critical approaches to race equality -- emphasize the importance of overall *outcomes*:

> a conspiracy has to be viewed as a whole, the component parts – which may be unobjectionable by themselves or taken individually – are not to be weeded out and enquired into separately (Joshua & Jordan 2003: 655).

This perfectly describes how racism operates across the education system: where countless mundane actions and decisions have racist impacts but they appear small, even insignificant, in isolation. It is their *cumulative* weight that matters; from Whitehall and national policy, through to daily acts of discipline enforcement and academic sorting in classrooms.

The law also recognizes that conspiracies can happen without meetings or formal agreements:

> no formal agreement is required, it may be express or implied, and it is not even necessary to prove the terms of any particular agreement or plan. Conspiracy may be demonstrated by concert of action between the participants all working together for a common purpose (Joshua & Jordan 2003: 655).

Laws designed to prevent the operation of business cartels talk about 'concerted practices'. The law provides for prosecutors to *infer* the operation of a cartel from its actions: there is no need for a meeting, and no need for a formal agreement. What is required, is evidence of 'concert of action' between participants 'working together for a common purpose'. An extended analysis of the English education system certainly provides evidence of concerted action by numerous participants, all effecting the legitimation and continued existence of Black educational exclusion and failure. I have already noted several examples, such as the actions of *policymakers* who continue to prioritize strategies that are known to disadvantage Black students; *teachers* whose very notion of 'ability' and motivation often preclude Black success; *media commentators* keen to promote stories of racial unrest, especially where White people are constructed as the new race victims; and the majority of *educational scholars* who are content to view race/racism as peripheral issues of marginal significance and declining importance in a world dominated by inequalities (such as class and gender) which appear more immediately relevant to their own concerns and experiences.

Racism in Education as a Hub-and-Spoke Conspiracy

Race inequality in education has all the key characteristics that identify a conspiracy in the law. A legal perspective can also help us understand the operation of the conspiracy by identifying what *kind* of conspiracy we are dealing with.

> a chain conspiracy involves several parties as links in one long criminal chain. Defendants in chain conspiracies are responsible for the actions of all participants in the chain, even if they never met some of the other participants in the chain. (Guide to California Law, no date).

Superficially this sounds like an interesting possibility, after all education happens sequentially (inequalities from primary school can be amplified and normalised in secondaries) and education policy is often thought of as a sequence of decisions and actions. However, as Stephen Ball has argued, policy is a lot 'messier' than is normally assumed: there are unpredictable and unstable links between different contexts of policy production and implementation (Ball 2006; 2008). Also, the racism that I have outlined (above) is a lot more extensive and powerful than this model suggests. There is, for example, a well known saying that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. But racism in education withstands lots of weak links; for example, there are some schools that prioritize race equality and produce outstanding results and there are countless individual teachers working tirelessly for race equality. But these broken links make little difference to the overall shape of the system. Consequently, the notion of a chain conspiracy does not usefully describe the

educational context in the UK. There is, however, another form of conspiracy that does illuminate the educational processes:

> In a hub-and-spoke conspiracy, many parties (the spokes), conspire with one person (the hub), but not with other defendants. (Guide to California Law, no date)

In key respects this model offers a useful way of conceiving of the processes that I have described. Individual people (teachers, policy makers, commentators) and separate agencies (education; the media; the criminal justice system) can be viewed as *spokes* connected through a central *hub* of Whiteness, i.e. the shared supposedly 'commonsense' assumptions that privilege White experiences, assumptions and interests. This, of course, is a wheel with literally *millions* of spokes. This idea shows how the actions and assumptions of different actors (from policymakers to media pundits and individual teachers) are all interconnected in mutually reinforcing and immensely powerful ways. The model highlights several important features about contemporary racism in education which offer a means of identifying, anticipating and better resisting the conspiracy in the future.

First, the hub-and-spoke model highlights the dialectical relationship between individual agency and wider structures of racism. Every individual actor is important and implicated but each individual can hide in the mass of other spokes and deny their significance. One of the strengths of institutional racism is that no single person or agency can be held up as wholly responsible, but to some extent the system draws authority from them all.

Second, the model highlights the reach and subtlety of racism. It suggests that every single action and policy is potentially implicated in the conspiracy. Because of the existing race inequalities in society, and because of the racist assumptions that most Whites bring into school, every single education policy is likely to impact on minoritized groups differently. Indeed, each policy is likely to have a disproportionately negative impact on particular groups, such as Black students and their Muslim peers of Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage. This is because racist assumptions saturate the system and we are not starting from a level playing field in terms of existing inequalities. Unless a policy is consciously interrogated for race equality impacts, therefore, the chances are that every policy is likely to become another spoke in the conspiracy.

Finally, the model highlights the importance of antiracist resistance. The conspiracy is so deeply entrenched in White assumptions and actions that resistance cannot be left to other people. Unless you are actively resisting, the chances are that you are just another spoke who routinely reinforces the situation (whether you realise it or not).

CONCLUSION

> **'It's not paranoia if they're really out to get you.'**
> Huey Newton, co-founder of the Black Panther Party (Delgado 2006: 56).

In this paper I have argued that the racism which shapes the experiences and achievements of Black students can usefully be understood as a form of conspiracy, whereby individual actors (from national policymakers and commentators, through to headteachers and classroom practitioners) and agencies (the economy, the education system, the media) operate in ways that embody, legitimize and sustain White racial hegemony. I am not arguing that the situation is merely *like* a conspiracy; I am suggesting that it *is* a conspiracy in terms of the law's understanding of the concept rather than the cartoon version of Hollywood movies and soap operas.

I have presented the analysis by drawing on a range of data. First I looked at the myopic focus on pupils in receipt of free school meals (FSM). I showed how an official commentary on this group has come to dominate discussions of educational inequality in England. This is sustained partly by the discursive slippage that moves from statistics on FSM pupils (13.2% of the cohort) and makes assertions about 'working class' students (more than 50% of the population according to popular understanding of the term). This shift also removes familiar race inequalities from view since they are only apparent in figures on the now hidden 86% N-FSM. By concentrating on FSM students the statistics present White students as the main under-achievers and, in the hands of the media and other commentators, this rapidly becomes a story about White racial *victimization* as if the White FSM statistics are somehow the fault of minoritized students, their communities and/or advocates.

Second I examined the use of 'Gap Talk', i.e. the constant iteration of official statements that race inequalities –where they exist – are lessening with each passing year. By deploying selective official statistics, Gap Talk constructs the view that race inequality is narrowing and, therefore, that policy is moving us inexorably towards equity. Consequently any calls for a radical reappraisal of policy objectives and strategies is made redundant. In contrast, an analysis of official statistics on a nationally representative sample, and over a longer time-period than is common in 'Gap Talk', revealed that the Black/white gap is *not* shrinking year upon year and that, unless there is a major shift in policy and practice unlike anything the system has ever seen, then in practical terms the Black/white gap is a *permanent* and *inevitable* feature of the current system.

Finally, building on the view that policy and practice should be judged by outcome, not intent, I concluded by outlining an understanding of racism as a form of hub-and-spoke conspiracy, where the interests and experiences of White people define the shape and function of policy and practice.

I realise that this analysis is challenging, possibly even offensive to those Whites who believe that racism is a marginal problem perpetrated by a few extremists with conscious malign intent. Nevertheless, the evidence is compelling; it suggests that racism is a fundamental, organizing principal of the contemporary education system. And so, the next time you hear about 'narrowing gaps', or you are told that race is irrelevant, take a moment to check that you are not being cast in the role of a compliant, self-interested spoke.

Notes

[1]   This exchange followed a few days after I gave the 2007 *Educational Review* Guest Lecture when (at a meeting on race and education policy in London) I unexpectedly met someone who had been in the lecture audience.

[2]   For discussion of the issues involved in the use of different 'race' census categories in research and policy see Gillborn (1995); Hylton (2008) and Mason (2000).

[3]   All quotations from Radio 5Live are my own verbatim transcriptions from an audio recording of the programmes. I use standard transcription notations:
(…)   denotes that speech has been edited out;
italicized text   denotes that the speaker stressed this word/phrase;

[4]   Students of Chinese and Indian ethnic heritage are the only principal minority groups who are *more* likely to achieve five higher grade passes than their White N-FSM peers: for a detailed account of these groups and an analysis of racism within their school experiences see Gillborn (2008: ch. 7).

[5]   The data are drawn from the Youth Cohort Survey (YCS), see Connolly (2006); Drew (1995); Gillborn (2008).