

Race, sex, class and educational achievement at age 16

Steve Strand



The message for social justice from my analysis is: your race, your sex and your class all matter and in combination.

There has been much comment since the report by the [Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities \(CRED\)](#) was published, but relatively little discussion of the data. I was asked by the commission to analyse inequalities in educational achievement at age 16 in England. My research report was published in full by the commission on its [website](#), but I think it helpful to summarise it here, and some important implications I see for policy in secondary schools.

In the analysis, I focus on educational achievement at age 16, at the end of statutory full-time education, because qualifications achieved then are key to young people's future educational, economic, health and well-being outcomes. I look at what historically have been the three central dimensions of inequality: race, sex and class, because an analysis that focusses on any one of these in isolation will inevitably miss important aspects of inequality. I use the Second Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE2) which is the most up-to-date nationally representative dataset with comprehensive measures of race, sex and class.

[Race, sex and class](#)

It is important first to get an appreciation of the relative size of race, sex and class achievement gaps. The largest achievement gaps are those associated with family socio-economic status (SES) as indexed by parental occupation, education and household income. For example, the achievement gap between pupils from the 20% of homes with the highest household income and the 20% of homes with the lowest household income was extremely large (0.91 SD), over three times larger than the gap between boys and girls which was small to moderate (0.29 SD) and over eight times larger than gap between Black and White pupils which was very small (0.11 SD).

The most important thing though, is to look at this data intersectionally, since everyone has a race, sex and class background, we don't hold any of these characteristics in isolation. The combination of nine major ethnic groups, by three levels of SES and separately for boys and girls, produces 54 unique combinations of race, sex and class, and we used statistical modelling to calculate the achievement score for each of these groups. The results are presented in Figure 1 on the next page.

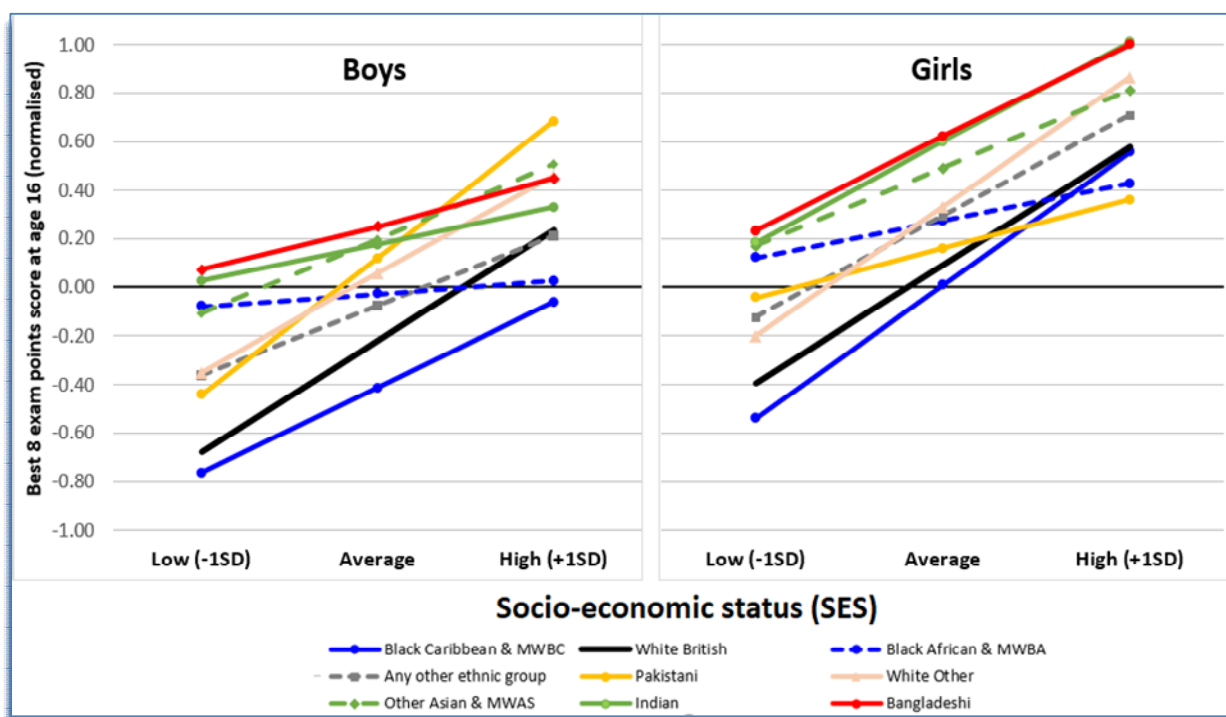
[Intersectionality and comparing gaps](#)

There are 46 comparisons that can be made between White British pupils and pupils of other ethnicities but of the same sex and SES. There were three instances of ethnic under-achievement compared to White British pupils. These were Black Caribbean and Black African

boys from high SES homes, and Pakistani girls from high SES homes. Understanding these outcomes means considering their intersectional nature, asking why exclusively among pupils from high SES or 'middle-class' homes, and why only boys or girls respectively? Many factors may be at play, including how different middle-class families deploy their capital, their expectations and norms, teacher expectations in high SES contexts, or cultural issues of masculinity or identity. I discuss these further in the report.

However, there is no under-achievement in the other 43 comparisons, and indeed in 23 of them pupils from ethnic minority groups had a substantially higher mean score than the White British average. So, where there are ethnic achievement gaps at age 16 they are predominantly associated with higher mean achievement by pupils from ethnic minority groups.

Figure 1: Best 8 exams points score at age 16 by race, sex and class combination



Policy and poverty

Given the critical role of educational achievement at age 16 for future life outcomes, an important question is which groups of young people are most at-risk of low achievement? The young people with the lowest achievement are those from low SES backgrounds, particularly (though not exclusively) White British and Black Caribbean young people, and particularly (though not exclusively) boys. The message for social justice from the analysis is: *your race, your sex and your class all matter and in combination.*

Given that by far the largest inequalities in educational achievement at age 16 are those related to social class, policies such as the '[pupil premium](#)' introduced in 2011 to target funding to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, are crucial. Poverty is a structural issue that impacts young people from all ethnic groups, although such funding particularly supports pupils from those ethnic minority groups (like Pakistani and Bangladeshi pupils) that are most likely to

experience poverty. It remains to be seen though whether the scale of the funding is sufficient given the size of the SES achievement gap, as the [National Audit Office](#) concluded in 2015 “no clear trend has been established and the gap remains wide”.

[Wider inequalities](#)

None of this denies ethnic inequalities in other educational or social outcomes, for example in entry to employment, to high-tariff universities, or to the highest status occupations. Indeed, a key question is why high educational achievement at age 16 does not always translate into later success. For example, the [CREd report](#) highlights that unemployment among those aged 16-24 is 10% for White British young people but almost twice as high at 19% for ethnic minority young people, and that “discrimination is likely to be part of the story” (p110). We need a closer analysis of where in the life course, and for which specific outcomes, institutional bias in relation to race, sex and class may be more, or less, relevant.

Steve Strand is Professor of Education at the University of Oxford.

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