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Gillborn, David; Demack, Sean; Rollock, Nicola and Warmington, Paul. 2017. Moving the goal-posts: education policy and 25 years of the Black/White achievement gap. *British Educational Research Journal*, 43(5), pp. 848-874. ISSN 0141-1926 [Article]

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## **Moving the goalposts: education policy and 25 years of the Black/White achievement gap**

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## Abstract

Drawing on a secondary analysis of official statistics the paper examines the changing scale of the inequality of achievement between White students and their Black British peers who identify their family heritage as Black Caribbean. We examine a 25 year period from the introduction of the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), in 1988, to the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the murder of Stephen Lawrence in 2013. It is the first time that the Black/White gap has been analysed over such a long period. The paper reviews the changing place of the Black/White gap in education debates and notes that, despite periods when race equality has appeared to be high on the political agenda, it has never held a consistent place at the heart of policy. Our findings shed light on how the Black/White gap is directly affected, often in negative ways, by changes in education policy. Specifically, whenever the key benchmark for achievement has been redefined, it has had the effect of restoring historic levels of race inequity; in essence, policy interventions to ‘raise the bar’ by toughening the benchmark have actively *widened* gaps and served to maintain Black disadvantage. Throughout the entire 25 year period, White students were always at least one and a half times more likely to attain the dominant benchmark than their Black peers. Our findings highlight the need for a sustained and explicit focus on race inequity in education policy. To date, the negative impacts of policy changes have been much more certain and predictable than occasional attempts to reduce race inequality.

Keywords: *achievement gap; Critical Race Theory; BlackCrit; education policy.*

## INTRODUCTION: ‘Monumental Change’?

‘The senseless killing of Stephen Lawrence in 1993 was a tragedy. It was also a moment that sparked monumental change in our society...’

Prime Minister David Cameron, 22 April 2013: speaking on the twentieth anniversary of the murder of Stephen Lawrence

‘I frequently get asked whether life has improved for black Londoners over the 20 years I have been campaigning for reform of our police, criminal justice system and state institutions to better serve my community. The straight answer is no, not really.’

Doreen Lawrence, quoted in Murphy (2013).

This paper arises from a research project designed to explore the impact on education of the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence and the subsequent inquiries, court cases and changes to race equality legislation.<sup>[1]</sup> Although the Lawrence family and their supporters had to battle for several years before their case was taken seriously by the authorities (Lawrence, 2006), the eventual public inquiry into the case (Macpherson, 1999) is frequently hailed as a pivotal moment in the advance of race equality in Britain; what the then Prime Minister Tony Blair described as ‘a new era in race relations’ (*Hansard*, 1999). In this paper we answer one simple question about Black students’ education in post-Lawrence Britain, *what has happened to the Black/White achievement gap over the last quarter of a century?*

Through secondary analysis of a range of official data we are able to examine the changing contours of the gap for a quarter of a century leading up to the anniversary of Stephen’s murder and Prime Minister Cameron’s declaration of ‘monumental change’. Our findings suggest that, despite considerable improvements in the achievement of Black students over time, their performance relative to their White peers in the dominant benchmark measures of attainment have remained remarkably consistent. This pattern has been shaped by changes in education policy (specifically those concerning how ‘standards’ are measured and debated) that have periodically served to wipe out several years of apparent progress by restoring the inequality of achievement to historic levels.

Our analysis begins by looking at how the Black/White achievement gap has featured in the changing landscape of relevant academic and policy debates over the period. We then set out the methods and data sources that provide the material for our analysis. The paper concludes by discussing the wider lessons that can be drawn, especially concerning the role of education policy, the uncertainty of progressive anti-racist gains, and the speed with which they can be rolled back by apparently technical changes in how ‘standards’ are measured and debated. First, it is useful to be explicit about the parameters for our analysis.

### **FRAMEWORK AND FOCUS: what this paper is, and is not, about**

This paper charts the inequality of achievement between Black and White students at the end of compulsory schooling over a 25 year period (1988 – 2013). Our analytic framework is informed by Critical Race Theory (CRT), an approach that views race as a social construction whose definition and deployment (in policy and practice) is highly complex, contingent and fluid (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado, 1995; Dixson & Rousseau 2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Taylor et al., 2016). Critical race theorists do not view racism as merely encompassing crude and obvious acts of race hatred. Rather, CRT also focuses on ‘business-as-usual forms of racism’ (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, p. xvi), i.e. the everyday, mundane and taken-for-granted processes and assumptions that shape society in the interests of people identified as ‘White’ and against the interests of particular minoritized groups.<sup>[2]</sup>

***Achievement, debt and opportunity:*** Critical scholars internationally have focused a great deal of attention on differences in educational attainment and increasingly challenge the deficit assumptions that can lie coded within the phrase ‘achievement gap’:

How we frame an issue is at least as significant as the argument we make about it. Calling the persistent achievement disparities between Black and Latino students and White students a ‘gap’ suggests that something inherent in Black and Latino students, their families, communities, cultures, schools, and teachers is responsible for the disparities ... These achievement disparities are a result of historical, economic, political, and moral decisions that we as a society have made over time. (Ladson-Billings, 2013, p. 13)

Terms such as ‘education debt’ (Ladson-Billings, 2006, 2013) and ‘opportunity gap’ (Carter & Welner, 2013; Milner, 2012) are sometimes used as an alternative. We share these authors’ concerns and use the phrase ‘inequality of achievement’ interchangeably to signal that our use of ‘achievement gap’ in no way aligns with racist stereotypes of Black cultural or intellectual deficit. Indeed, as our analysis unfolds the case is made that the Black/White gap is, in a very real sense, a creation of education policymakers and their preferred accountability strategies.

Our data measure ‘achievement’ in relation to the benchmarks that are set by government and applied by a range of stakeholders (including the media, employers, parents, academics, and institutions of further and higher education). The reason for this focus is that difference rates of success in these key benchmark measures can simultaneously reflect inequalities in the educational opportunities afforded to particular groups inside school and exert a significant influence on the kinds of educational and labour-market opportunities available subsequently (cf. Aldridge, 2004; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Tikly et al., 2006).

***Why Black Caribbean students?*** Policy-makers have switched their gaze between numerous different ethnic groups during the twenty-five year span of this paper (Tomlinson, 2008) and, most recently, have repeatedly asserted the importance of the White majority as a policy concern (Gillborn, 2010a; House of Commons Education Committee, 2014). The pattern of achievement between different minoritized groups in England is complex and changing. Elsewhere we have set out the relevant details for the largest minority ethnic groups (Gillborn, Rollock, Warmington & Demack, 2016): our guiding concern here is to analyse the relative attainments of students who self-identify as *White British* or *Black Caribbean* in terms of the dominant census-categories of ethnic origin in the UK (see Drew & Demack, 1998). In the past such a focus would not have seemed strange (Drew & Gray, 1991) but is now often met with criticism that it is somehow unfair, or misleading, to discuss race

inequality without giving equal attention to minoritized groups that generally perform better than their White peers, such as students of Indian ethnic heritage (Hill, 2009). Setting aside the dangers inherent in model minority stereotypes (cf. Gillborn, 2008), there are two main reasons for our focus on White British and Black Caribbean students. First, this is the comparison that shaped initial debates about a Black/White achievement gap in Britain (Rampton, 1981) and the Black Caribbean group retains huge significance educationally and politically (Figueroa 2004; Warmington, 2014); they are one of the most politically active of minoritized communities (John, 2006; Sivanandan, 1990; Tomlinson, 2008) and yet, in schools, they are consistently among those achieving the lowest results overall and most likely to be permanently excluded (Rollock, Gillborn, Vincent & Ball, 2015). The foundational protests, campaigns and academic studies that launched multicultural education in the UK were largely concerned with the experiences of Black Caribbean parents and children (Warmington, 2014). In this sense, the campaign for justice that grew around the murder of Stephen Lawrence has its roots deep in the history of British racism and anti-racism. Stephen is now buried in Jamaica but his educational achievements and those of his peers are captured in the statistics that we examine here.

A second reason for focusing on Black Caribbean students arises from our conceptual framework. CRT is often accused by its detractors of operating a ‘Black/White binary’ that treats Black (especially African American) people as emblematic of all minoritized groups (see Cole, 2011; Darder & Torres, 2004). This is a debate that has been addressed within CRT for many years and has seen the development of numerous ‘off-shoot movements’ that focus upon the distinctive experiences and insights of different groups, including Latinex, Native American and Asian American people (cf. Yosso, 2005). This in turn has sparked the growth of Black Critical Theory, or ‘BlackCrit’ (Lewis, 2000) which seeks to understand and expose ‘the *specificity* of Blackness’ (Dumas & ross, 2016, p. 5):

BlackCrit intervenes at the point of detailing how policies and everyday practices find their logic in, and reproduce Black suffering (Dumas & ross, 2016, p. 15).

The Black/White gap, therefore, has outstanding significance in its own right; Black Caribbean students have historically fared badly in terms of achievement and exclusion; Black Caribbean communities have been at the forefront of political agency against White racism; and the contours of Black Caribbean education speak directly to deep structures and processes of racial injustice in education:

attention to antiblackness is a critical component in resisting White supremacy. In fact, Nakagawa (2012) argues, “anti-black racism is the *fulcrum* of white supremacy” (emphasis added). (Dumas & ross, 2016, p. 11).

***Intersectionality: what about everything else?*** In the same way that our focus on Black Caribbean students must be explained, so too must our decision to prioritize a racial lens. For critical race scholars there sometimes seems to be a constant requirement to consider ‘one more thing’ as detractors argue that no analysis of racism and race inequity can be trusted, or even voiced, until every conceivable alternative has been exhausted (for a critique see Preston & Bhopal, 2012). In view of the international literature on Black/White achievement gaps in education (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Lingard, 2011; Rudolph, 2016; Taylor, 2006; Valencia, 2015) our focus remains a vital concern. This is not to deny the significance of other factors (such as class, gender, dis/ability and sexuality). Indeed, each of the contributing authors have repeatedly considered issues of intersectionality in their previous work but we remain equally aware of the need to avoid becoming trapped in an endless pursuit of more and more interlocking categories and forms of analysis. As Richard Delgado, one of the founders of critical race theory, has observed, ‘. . . intersectionality can easily paralyze progressive work and thought because of the realization that whatever unit you choose to work with, someone may come along and point out that you forgot something’ (2011, p. 1264).

The limits of space restrict the opportunity for an extended discussion of intersectionality but it is worth noting that the concept was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1995), a leading critical race theorist. The concept was particularly aimed at understanding how different axes of differentiation might conspire to erase particular areas of discrimination, especially in the case of Black women. Subsequently the term has become something of a ‘buzzword’ (Davis, 2008), often eviscerated of any critical content and even acting to close down race critical analyses (Gillborn, 2015.[<sup>3</sup>])

Before we look at the numbers in detail, it is necessary to recap on how previous research has handled the question of differential achievement by Black and White students. As we shall see, despite periods of intense debate, minority ethnic achievement has not enjoyed a stable place in academic or political discourse.

## **PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON THE BLACK/WHITE ACHIEVEMENT GAP THROUGH THE DECADES**

Inequalities in educational achievement consistently generate political controversy, especially when race and racism are implicated; this was certainly the case when the first official statistics were published on what has become known as the Black/White achievement gap. In 1981 the Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups (chaired by Anthony Rampton) issued an interim report on the achievement of ‘West Indian’ children. Reflecting the success of Black

parental mobilization around education (e.g. Black Peoples Progressive Association and Redbridge Community Relations Council, 1978) -- what Sally Tomlinson describes as a 'combination of riots and reports' (2008, p. 82) -- the Committee's terms of reference explicitly directed them to report on Black students '*as a matter of urgency*' (Rampton, 1981, p. 1 emphasis added). In the absence of routine ethnic monitoring, the Committee relied on a special survey, by the Department for Education and Science (DES) Statistics Branch, of six local education authorities (covering around half of the minority ethnic pupil population). The survey results were quoted at length in the report (pp. 6-10) and were given such prominence that the exact proportion of school leavers gaining five or more higher grades in their final examinations were quoted in Parliament (*Hansard*, 1981). The data highlighted a stark difference in achievement, with 3 per cent of 'West Indian' students reaching the desired level compared with 16 per cent of 'all other leavers' (i.e. the total excluding 'West Indian' and 'Asian' students: it was not thought necessary to collect separate data on White students).

The Rampton committee judged their statistics to provide clear 'evidence ... that West Indian children as a group are failing in our education system' (1981, p. 70). The report called for action to combat racism, especially in the lower expectations that White teachers were said to have of Black students, and highlighted the need for systematic ethnic monitoring. However, the Conservative government of the time (led by Margaret Thatcher), had inherited the committee (from its Labour predecessor) and rather than embracing the committee's recommendations, the government chose to 'dismiss Rampton from his post' and disregard the report in all major respects (Richardson, 2012, p. 66). The subsequent full report by the Committee, now headed by Lord Swann, relied on a second DES survey (of five local authorities in 1982) which again showed a pronounced inequality of achievement between 'West Indian' students (6 per cent gained five or more higher graded results) and peers in the 'all other leavers' group (19 per cent)(Swann, 1985, pp. 110-118).

During the 1980s, therefore, the most prominent official statistics on the Black/White gap were based on one-off special investigations that did not even operationalize a separate category for White students (Rampton, 1981; Swann, 1985). The academic literature of the period included several additional studies but most focused on a limited range of schools and/or local authorities (Craft & Craft, 1983; Driver, 1980; Eggleston et al., 1986; Kysel, 1988; Mabey, 1986; Maughan & Rutter, 1986; Nuttall et al., 1989; Smith & Tomlinson, 1989). The only quantitative data available during the 1980s that offers a nationally representative snap-shot of achievement was derived from the Youth Cohort Study (YCS) and this confirmed the patterns highlighted by the smaller scale work (Drew & Gray, 1989). The YCS is one of the principal sources that we use in our new analysis (below) but, before we examine the changing patterns revealed in the YCS and other official statistics, it is important to contextualize our analysis by noting how the academic discussion of the Black/White gap has changed over subsequent years.



The 1990s saw the rise of school effectiveness research, which shifted the focus from overall group outcomes and towards analyses of the impacts of different schooling and management practices at an institutional level (e.g. Sammons, Hillman & Mortimore, 1995; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). School effectiveness research rarely considered race as a variable and, during this period, the attention of research funders and policy makers shifted decisively away from questions of social justice and achievement gaps (for criticism see Morley & Rassool, 1999; Slee, Weiner & Tomlinson, 1998). The silence on overall outcomes by student ethnicity was broken by a research review that had been commissioned, by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted, the official school's inspectorate), to mark the tenth anniversary of the Swann Report (Gillborn & Gipps, 1996). In addition to examining previous academic research (quantitative and qualitative) the review also drew on a range of local authority statistics. The more recent data indicated continuing and, in some cases, growing inequalities between different ethnic groups:

African Caribbean pupils have not shared equally in the increasing rates of educational achievement: in many LEAs [Local Education Authorities] their average achievements are significantly lower than other groups... In some areas there is a growing gap between the achievements of African Caribbean pupils and their peers. (Gillborn & Gipps, 1996, p. 2)

The review received a generally positive reception (from community groups, teacher unions and the government). On the day of publication the then education minister, Cheryl Gillan, announced a 'ten-point plan' to 'improve the performance of school children from the ethnic minorities' (see Hammersley, 2006, p. 67). Unfortunately, the plan mainly concerned the *possibility* of gathering more data and the decision to set up an 'ad hoc task group to help chart progress' (Local Government Chronicle, 1996). Four years later Ofsted commissioned a further review (Gillborn & Mirza, 2000) as part of its response to the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry. Although national data by ethnic origin was still not collected at this point, the second Ofsted review drew on 118 statistical returns from LEAs that had applied for funding under the Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant (EMAG). The material revealed some interesting findings, not least the absence of ethnic monitoring in many areas; around one in three of the LEAs that bid for funding to support minority ethnic achievement did not have quantitative data on the achievement of 16 years olds analysed by ethnic origin (Gillborn & Mirza, 2000, p. 8). The available data confirmed that, overall, Black Caribbean students were not achieving as highly on average as their White peers but also pointed to the variability of achievement between different regions and pockets of high achievement by Black students

Black pupils are capable of high achievement. In one in ten authorities that monitor GCSE results by ethnicity, pupils in all recorded Black groups are more likely to attain the benchmark than their white peers.

However, there is still a picture of marked inequality elsewhere: there are almost four times as many LEAs where the picture is reversed and white pupils outperform each of the Black groups. (Gillborn & Mirza, 2000, p. 10).

In 2002, some 21 years after the Rampton report had called for systematic ethnic monitoring, it finally became a national requirement for schools and local authorities to gather ethnically based data on the achievements of students in compulsory education. As with previous periods of attention to race equality, the move was prompted by a combination of violence and public soul-searching, this time as a direct result of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry (Macpherson, 1999) and the subsequent Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 (see Gillborn, 2008, pp. 118-36).

During the 2000s the availability of national data (on all students attending state-funded schools) has enabled more detailed analyses than previously possible. This work has included attempts to weigh the significance and intersections of numerous different factors, including ethnic origin, social class, gender, special educational needs, student aspirations and parental education (Briggs, Burgess & Wilson, 2006; Lewis & Starkey, 2014; Lindsay, Pather & Strand, 2006; Strand, 2007, 2008, 2014, 2015). This research is often very ambitious in scope and includes the use of multiple regression statistical techniques which claim to quantify the separate independent influence of factors such as ethnic origin, gender and poverty. Such research has been critiqued by critical race scholars who identify shortcomings in the conceptualization of race and racism in traditional quantitative approaches. In particular, quantitative research tends to treat ethnic origin as if it were a causal factor rather than a social identity often associated with discriminatory treatment at the hands of educational institutions. As Michael Apple has argued, race 'is not a stable category', its meaning and its use 'is contingent and historical'; race 'is not a thing ... [it] is a *construction*, a set of fully social *relationships*' (Apple, 2001, p. 204, original emphasis). In addition, quantitative models have been criticized for applying a crude and mechanistic view of how racism might be quantified; often assuming that race discrimination can only be identified *after* other relevant factors have been removed from the data. As Brentnall (2014) and Gillborn (2010b) have argued, however, race discrimination often intersects with, and finds expression in, other related factors such as prior attainment and disproportionate placement in lower ranked teaching groups.

Since the late 2000s the issue of minority ethnic achievement has once again slid from the news and policy agenda. This period has seen an almost obsessive concern with the attainment of students in

receipt of free school meals (FSM), which is often used as a crude proxy for economic disadvantage (e.g. Cassen & Kingdon, 2007). White students are among the lowest achieving groups in receipt of FSM and they have become the principal point of concern for political parties across the spectrum. Press and political coverage frequently moves from specific data on FSM Whites (around 14 per cent of White school students)<sup>[4]</sup> to broader arguments about ‘*working class*’ Whites (a term that around 60 per cent of British adults identify with)<sup>[5]</sup> and almost inexorably to broad brush pronouncements about White students *as a whole*. The tone of debate is captured, and inflamed, by headlines such as the Daily Mail’s ‘*The Betrayal of White pupils*’ (Harris, 2016).

The Black/White achievement gap, therefore, has been a longstanding issue in British educational research and policy debates. In the current climate, however, it would be easy to assume that the tables have been reversed and that Black students no longer experience an inequality of achievement when compared with their White peers. As our analysis (below) demonstrates, however, the contemporary reality strongly echoes the patterns that used to generate headlines decades ago. In addition to highlighting the continuing scale of the problem, our analysis situates the issues within a uniquely long time scale and, perhaps most importantly, reveals its historical relationship to key changes in education policy.

#### **METHODS: Sources and Statistics**

The emphasis on outcomes and performance within the new public management has seen the proliferation of performance indicators and various league tables of performance measures across the last two decades or so... (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 122)

Much has changed in education during the quarter of a century reviewed in this paper, not least the quality and availability of statistical data on educational achievement. This trend, however, does not reflect a simple pursuit of knowledge for its own sake; education systems across the globe have shared in a drive to measure educational performance as a means of exerting greater control - sometimes referred to as ‘policy as numbers’ (Ozga & Lingard, 2007). In many ways England has been at the forefront of such moves, for example, Prime Minister Tony Blair’s ‘Delivery Unit’ (2001-2005) was run by an education professor (Michael Barber) who developed his own system that put quantitative data at the heart of the policy process (Barber, 2012). The increasing *quantity* of official data, however, does not necessarily denote an improvement in the *quality* of the material. Official statistics reflect the things that interest the government and ethnic diversity rarely features very highly on the educational agenda, despite the efforts of minority communities and their advocates (Tomlinson, 2008). Since the introduction of national school performance tables, in 1992, there have been significant increases in both the amount of data gathered and the level of political and media

scrutiny to which the data are subjected. However, it was only as part of the post-Lawrence Inquiry legislative reforms (*ten years* after the publication of the first national performance tables) that the government finally mandated that state schools and local authorities should gather ethnically-based data on all students. In this paper we draw on the best available national data but there are important gaps and changes in coverage during the 25 year period in question.

Our analysis draws on two principal sources of official statistics, together they offer the most reliable and comprehensive indication available of the relative attainment of Black Caribbean and White British students at the end of their compulsory education (aged 15/16).

### **Table 1 about here**

Our first source is the Youth Cohort Study (YCS), a series of longitudinal surveys that followed groups (cohorts) of young people for three years after the completion of their compulsory schooling. Funded by a range of government departments, the YCS recorded details of educational achievements and experiences plus young people's activities outside of education and employment. The first survey (YCS1) began in 1985 and was repeated periodically until the 2000s, when a new survey was introduced, called the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE). Initially the LSYPE ran alongside, and complemented, the YCS but it has now replaced the older survey (DfE, no date). Originally funded by the Department for Education, in 2012 the LSYPE moved to funding by the Economic and Social Research Council, which is independent of government, and is currently managed by the Centre for Longitudinal Studies (UCL Institute of Education, no date). Table 1 summarizes details of the various YCS surveys that we use in our analysis. In this paper we are concerned with changes in achievement at the end of compulsory schooling, starting in 1988 when a new form of public examination, the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), was introduced. We begin, therefore, with data from YCS4 that relate to exam results from the summer of 1988. The LSYPE gathers a great deal of additional information on its sampled students but, most significantly for our purposes, to date the LSYPE has only looked at two cohorts of students (those who left secondary school in 2006 and 2015). In order to complete the 25 year analysis, therefore, we require an additional data source.

### **Table 2 about here**

Our second source of official data on school attainment is the National Pupil Database (NPD). Introduced in 2002, and run by the Department for Education, the NPD has developed to include a wide range of statistical sources that provide a wealth of information relating to school-age students and young people in England. Table 2 summarizes the various components that specifically relate to

students at the end of their compulsory schooling ('Key Stage 4' as it is designated in English education policy). We use NPD data in our analysis from 2004 onwards, when the published data began to use a more detailed ethnic breakdown (see Table 3). This is a considerable advance on the YCS which was limited to a few composite ethnic categories. In addition, the NPD allows us to chart differences in attainment from year-to-year whereas the YCS rarely covered two successive annual cohorts.

### **Table 3 about here**

Combining material from these two official sources (the YCS and the NPD), therefore, provides the best available picture of changes in the Black/White achievement gap over a 25 year period but there are important caveats that should be borne in mind. First, the changes in ethnic classification mean that the key groupings are not the same at the beginning and the end of the period. Specifically, the early data compare students grouped in relatively crude composite categories that were designated 'White' and 'Black'; the latter reflects common practice in the 1980s when the term 'African Caribbean' was widely used in the UK (by academics and community groups) as a means of describing people who would identify their family origins in Black Africa and/or the Caribbean (Drew & Gray, 1989; Gillborn, 1990; Sivanandan, 1990; Warmington, 2014). The NPD uses more detailed categories that mirror official guidance following the 2001 Census and the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 (CRE, 2001). From 2004, therefore, we are able to be more precise and so our comparison looks specifically at students categorized as 'White British' and 'Black Caribbean'.<sup>[6]</sup> The two datasets cover a great deal of similar ground but a further complicating factor is that there are key differences in coverage geographically and educationally. The YCS offered a nationally representative sample of students in England and Wales but, following the devolution of education policy to the constituent parts of the UK, the NPD refers to England only. In addition, the YCS included students who attended private schools whereas public analyses of exam performance at age 16 in the NPD are restricted to students attending state-maintained schools. In view of these important differences between the YCS and NPD, in our charts (below) we use a break in the data lines (between 2003 and 2004) to signify the change in coverage.

### **ANALYSIS: Changing Measures, Changing Outcomes**

In business, words are words; explanations are explanations, promises are promises, but only performance is reality.

Harold S. Geneen (1910 – 1997) Former CEO, ITT Corporation

There is a long tradition of debate in the social sciences about the relative value of quantitative and qualitative data (Burgess, 1993; Connolly, 2007; Covarrubias & Velez, 2013). In the worlds of policy, politics and the media there is a widespread assumption that numbers are objective, factual, and reliable; but performance is only as good as the measure by which it is judged. The last 25 years have seen an unprecedented political focus on ‘educational standards’ but the measures by which standards are judged are prone to periodic challenge and redefinition. When considering the Black/White achievement gap, therefore, the question of *which* ‘standard’ we use to measure achievement becomes vital. In fact, as we will show, changes in the way that achievement is benchmarked, for schools and students, have a clear and iniquitous impact on the Black/White gap itself.

### ***Uneven Progress: 1988 – 2005***

Our analysis begins in 1988 with the introduction of the GCSE; a single examination that was meant to remove the injustices of the previous dual examination system in which working class and minority ethnic students were over-represented in the lower status exam, the CSE (Certificate of Secondary Education)(Lowe, 2007).[<sup>7</sup>] In fact, most GCSE examinations used a system of ‘tiered’ exam papers that effectively reintroduced the dual-status system but behind the façade of a single examination and in a process that few parents and students even knew existed (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). For example, in English language examinations students who were examined in the ‘Foundation Tier’ (the lowest of two tiers) could achieve a maximum grade of C (where grades A, B and C are considered the ‘higher’ pass grades necessary for further advanced study). In mathematics there were initially three tiers and, until 2006, Foundation Tier students could not do better than a grade D, which was widely considered as a failure. Research has shown that tiering decisions tend to exacerbate social inequalities, for example, with negative impacts on girls’ achievement (Boaler, 1997; Elwood & Murphy 2002; Stobart, 2008) and with Black students typically over-represented in Foundation Tier examinations (see Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Strand 2007; Tikly et al., 2006).<sup>8</sup>

### **Figure 1 about here**

In 1988 the level of achievement that was generally understood to denote academic success for a student was viewed as five or more higher grade passes (A-C, later A\*-C) in any GCSE subjects.[<sup>9</sup>] For example, when national and local newspapers printed their own versions of the first official performance tables, they ranked schools according to the proportion of students attaining this benchmark level of achievement. If we chart the Black/White gap using this *original* benchmark then we can see that by 2013 the gap had virtually disappeared; 82.7 per cent of White British students achieved five or more higher grade passes compared with 80.4 per cent of Black Caribbeans, a gap of 2.3 percentage points (see Figure 1). By this measure the Black/White gap was widest in 1993 and 1996 at 22 percentage points. However, the narrowing of this gap has not been a story of steady

uniform progress. Indeed, the gap was prone to fluctuation until the mid-2000s; between 1988 and 1990 the inequality of achievement grew, it fell a little in the next YCS (in 1991) only to grow again and so on. It is not until 2006 that the data show a reduction in the gap for three successive samples. This trend of year-on-year reductions continues throughout the rest of the period with the single exception of 2012 when the gap grew by 0.5, only to fall by a further 1 percentage point in 2013.

If we measure the Black/White gap in relation to the original GCSE benchmark (of five or more higher grade passes), therefore, the story of the last 25 years would appear to be a positive one. However, it is highly significant that the period of the most dramatic and consistent reductions in the achievement inequality coincided with the introduction of a *new* benchmark in 2006 (see below); in essence, Figure 1 indicates that the Black/White gap only began to show consistent falls when the measure itself became less important. Of course, we cannot know whether the gap would have shrunk so dramatically had the original benchmark remained in place. Nevertheless, the reduction is significant, not least because it demonstrates clearly what so many critical researchers and community activists have argued for years, i.e. that there is no inherent reason why Black students cannot attain on a par with their White peers.

### ***Moving the Goalposts: 'The Gold Standard' 2006 - 2010***

There are some basic skills, knowledge and understanding that everyone needs in order to progress and succeed in learning, employment and life. First among these are a sound grounding in functional English and maths ... We will toughen the performance tables... (DfES, 2005b, pp. 36 & 37)

In 2005 the then Labour government announced plans to phase out the existing GCSE benchmark to be replaced with a 'tougher' measure that now required that the five higher grades must include success in suitable English and mathematics examinations.

Known as the 'gold standard' (DfES, 2006c, para 9), this new benchmark was intended to be more demanding and, predictably, overall achievement rates fell in comparison with the previous measure. As Figure 2 illustrates, however, the impact was not experienced equitably between ethnic groups: Black Caribbean achievement was affected more severely and consequently the Black/White gap according to this new benchmark grew; from 12.8 percentage points in the previous benchmark to 15 percentage points in the 'gold standard'. Both English and mathematics GCSEs use tiered examination papers and so this effect could reflect the disproportionate number of Black students who are typically entered in the lower tier, where the highest grades are not available (Gillborn & Youdell,

2000; Strand 2007; Tikly et al., 2006). Whatever the underlying reason, the effect of the benchmark change is clear, the ‘gold standard’ widened the Black/White gap.

In the years following the introduction of the ‘gold standard’ schools adjusted to the new measure and overall achievement according to the new benchmark increased year-on-year. Both White British and Black Caribbean students shared in this trend. Indeed, the rate of improvement was somewhat greater for Black Caribbean students and, as a result, the Black/White gap narrowed from 15 percentage points in 2006 to 11.4 percentage points in 2010. Unfortunately, a change in government heralded another change in the benchmark measure and, once again, the impact on race equality was immediate and negative.

### **Figure 2 about here**

#### ***Raising Standards and Widening Inequality? The English Baccalaureate 2011 - 2013***

Prime Minister David Cameron’s Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government, like previous administrations (on the left and right) placed education reform high on the policy agenda. Among a range of sweeping changes was the introduction of a new benchmark measure of attainment. The scale and nature of the change is captured in the following quotation:

performance tables will focus on pupils’ attainment of the basics, including five GCSEs at grade C or above, in English and mathematics. But this is not enough – we should expect every pupil to be offered a broad academic education to age 16 and so we will also report the proportion of pupils who achieve the new English Baccalaureate which includes GCSEs at grade C or above in English, mathematics, two sciences, a humanities subject and a foreign or ancient language. (DfE, 2010b, para. 61)

The government described this change as ‘a significant raising of the bar for secondary schools’ (DfE, 2010b, para. 62) and argued that it would help disadvantaged groups, who were known to sometimes be excluded from higher status and more selective GCSE subjects, including ‘boys, those eligible for FSM [free school meals] and from particular ethnic communities’ (DfE, 2010b, para. 60). Critics argued that the measure reflected the personal prejudices of the then Education Secretary Michael Gove (Watt, 2011) and a major teachers’ union described it as ‘a throwback to bygone times ... almost a carbon copy of the 1868 Taunton Report which described what a curriculum designed for specific social strata in the 19th century should look like’ (NUT, 2011). The Education Select Committee (a group of MPs drawn from across the political parties) criticized the Government’s failure to consult on the new measure and expressed doubt that it would have the progressive effects



claimed by its advocates (House of Commons Education Committee, 2011). Whatever the long term aspirations behind the introduction of the E.Bacc (as it became known), its immediate impact was almost certain to be especially difficult for those groups currently under-represented in high status curriculum areas, simply because they were the least likely to even be studying, let alone gaining pass grades, in the required subjects. This fear proved to be well founded.

### **Figure 3 about here**

Levels of attainment measured against the new E.Bacc benchmark fell dramatically in 2011. The majority of students who would have achieved the ‘gold standard’ now found themselves falling short in the new benchmark. For both White British and Black Caribbean students the impact was pronounced; this is represented in Figure 3 as an *E.Bacc penalty*, i.e. the proportion of students whose attainment would have counted as a success under the ‘gold standard’ but failed to satisfy the requirements of the English Baccalaureate. Black Caribbean students suffered the greatest penalty; 84 per cent of Black students who succeeded in the gold standard measure in 2011 failed to meet the requirements for the E.Bacc, compared with 73 per cent of their White peers. Students in each of the principal ethnic groups in England experienced marked falls in benchmark achievement as a result of the E.Bacc but the greatest proportionate impact was experienced by Black Caribbean students (Gillborn, 2014, p.35). Once again, ‘raising the bar’ by changing the benchmark achievement indicator had the immediate impact of widening the Black/White gap.

### **DISCUSSION: Sustained race inequity over a quarter of a century**

‘I don't think the government has race on the agenda whatsoever ... It is because of how racism and inequality happens that Stephen was murdered. Do we want to go back to that? To 1993 and before?’

Doreen Lawrence quoted in Muir, 2012

It is rare that educational research is able to examine a key equity question over a period of time as great as a quarter of a century. As we have seen, the data tell a different story depending on the measures that we apply; in terms of the original achievement measure that was in place in 1988 (five or more higher grade GCSE passes in any subject) then the Black/White gap has almost disappeared (see Figure 1). But the period has seen two major changes in the benchmark definition of academic success and these tell a different story. In this section, we take a longer term view over the 25 years and explore some of the wider conclusions that the data suggest concerning race inequity and education.

### ***Success Against the Odds? The Consistency of Race Inequity***

Figure 4 summarizes the changing scale of the Black/White gap over the 25 year period. In contrast to Figure 1, Figure 4 takes account of changes in the official measure of achievement (the period for each of the different benchmarks is shown along the lower access). Figure 4 also includes details of the Black/White gap in terms of an *Odds Ratio* (OR) calculation, i.e. comparing White students' chances of achieving the benchmark in relation to their Black Caribbean peers.<sup>[10]</sup> Perhaps the most striking aspect of Figure 4 is how closely the lines seem to mirror each other. Although there are fluctuations in the size of the Black/White gap from year-to-year, the overall pattern is quite different from the converging lines seen in Figure 1. The odds ratio calculations confirm the consistently significant scale of the gap in relation to the changing benchmark measures; the smallest OR (1.56) was recorded in 1999, meaning that *throughout the entire 25 year period, White students were always at least one and a half times more likely to attain the dominant benchmark*. The greatest inequity (OR 2.84) was recorded in 1993, the year when Stephen Lawrence was murdered, meaning that White students were almost three times as likely to achieve the benchmark. There are seven points where the OR is greater than 2, meaning that White students had at least twice the chance of success relative to their Black peers, most recently in 2012 (almost at the end of the 25 year period under scrutiny).

**Figure 4 about here**

### ***'Raising the Bar' Widens Race Inequality***

The impact of changes to the benchmark indicator are clearly visible in Figure 4. Both occasions where government decided to 'raise the bar' were marked by significant falls in the proportion of Black and White students who achieved the required benchmark level. On both occasions the impact was more severe for Black students, meaning that the achievement gap grew:

- the introduction of the 'gold standard' (by a Labour administration) saw the odds of White success relative to their Black peers rise from 1.69 in 2005 to 1.90 in 2006;
- the introduction of the E.Bacc (by a Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government) saw the OR rise from 1.58 in 2010 to 2.2 in 2011.

The data suggest that *the introduction of new 'tougher' benchmarks not only reduces the overall scale of 'academic success', it also sets back progress toward race equality by restoring historic rates of disadvantage*; in the case of the E.Bacc seven years of improvement was wiped away, restoring White advantage to more than twice the odds of Black success, a rate previously last seen in 2003.

***‘Gap Talk’, Education Policy and the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry***

It is usually difficult to draw any firm conclusions about the impact of education policy on patterns of student achievement; for example, it takes more than a decade for children to move through their compulsory schooling in England and so even the most dramatic improvements in the treatment of Black students would be unlikely to show any instant impact in terms of GCSE success. Gillborn & Youdell (2000), for example, found that most students’ level of GCSE tier entry was already decided at age 13/14, before they began their final two years of compulsory schooling. Nevertheless, we believe that our findings shed new light on the gulf between the rhetoric and reality of education policy and race equality in England.

Since the publication of *the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report* (Macpherson, 1999) successive UK governments, from different parts of the political spectrum, have argued that their policies are having a positive impact on the scale of race inequality in education. The phrase *‘gap talk’* has been used to characterize policy makers’ tendency to selectively cite apparently impressive percentage improvements (measured over a brief timescale) in order to give the impression that things are getting better and, thereby, encourage the (erroneous) assumption that remaining inequities will soon be gone. Originally coined in relation to race inequity in England (Gillborn, 2008, pp. 65-68), ‘gap talk’ has subsequently been critiqued internationally, including in the US, Canada and Australia (Butler, 2015; Harrison, 2012; Hollinsworth, 2016; Lingard, 2011; Lingard et al., 2012; Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2013; Rudolph, 2016; Vass & Chalmers 2016). The following examples of gap talk are each taken from official statements that claim significant progress in relation to the race equality in English schools:

... there has been a clear expectation that policies aimed at raising attainment levels amongst pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds will disproportionately benefit ethnic minorities ... Indeed, some evaluations report that these programmes are already having positive impacts on ethnic minority groups. (Cabinet Office, 2003, p. 58)

Schools Minister Derek Twigg welcomed the figures, saying that minority ethnic groups were making great progress and that evidence showing that the gap was closing between Black, Pakistani and Bangladeshi pupils and other pupils at GCSE and equivalent was also encouraging. (DfES, 2005c)

The biggest improvers are Bangladeshi and Black Caribbean pupils ... Schools Minister Andrew Adonis welcomed this continuing upward trend and the sustained progress that the

Government is making in closing the gap between Black, Pakistani and Bangladeshi pupils and other pupils at GCSE and equivalent (DfES, 2006c)

We are already making significant progress in tackling educational attainment gaps ... (Department for Communities and Local Government (2007)

The National Strategies have supported the delivery of a wide range of programmes, including ... Narrowing the Gaps (for pupils on free school meals, black and ethnic minority pupils and gifted and talented pupils from deprived backgrounds). (DfE, 2011, pp. 2-3)

For years black pupils' results have lagged behind their peers' but that gap is being eroded at all levels - the government's school reforms are helping thousands more black pupils (DfE, 2014b)

Despite repeated assertions that the Black/White gap is '*being eroded*', '*narrowing*' and '*closing*', the odds of greater success for White students remain significant throughout the 25 years we have reviewed; fluctuating between one and half and more than twice the chance of their Black Caribbean peers. In this way, policy-makers 'gap talk' has distracted from a recognition that there has been little improvement in the substantive race inequality between the achievements of White British and Black Caribbean students in the benchmark measures of success. At times the 'gap talk' has camouflaged a *deteriorating* situation; the OR of 1.56 in 1999 is lower than any subsequent value. In these terms the celebratory use of 'gap talk' (above), to highlight marginal periodic gains in the Twenty-first century, mask the fact that the odds of Black Caribbean success relative to their White peers have never improved on the level achieved at the end of the last century.

While the rhetoric of 'gap talk' has continued, we have seen that policy interventions to 'raise the bar' by toughening the benchmark have *actively widened* achievement inequities and served to maintain Black disadvantage. This points to an important conclusion in terms of race equality and education policy; simply talking about a commitment to greater equity is meaningless unless policy and practice embody a serious attempt to change things for the better: the last 25 years have seen much talk, but too little meaningful action from educators and policymakers.

## CONCLUSIONS

'Carrying out an EIA [Equality Impact Assessment] involves systematically assessing the likely (or actual) effects of policies on people in respect of disability, gender, including gender identity, and racial equality...'

Equality & Human Rights Commission (2010, p. 3)

‘We have smart people in Whitehall who consider equalities issues while they're making the policy. We don't need all this extra tick-box stuff ... So I can tell you today we are calling time on equality impact assessments.’

Prime Minister David Cameron (BBC News Online, 2012)

The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry (Macpherson, 1999) raised fundamental questions about race equality in the UK and included specific recommendations for change in education. Race equality legislation was substantially reformed as a result of the inquiry and, among the numerous changes, public bodies now faced a duty to formally consider the possible impacts of their actions and, if reforms seemed likely to have negative consequences, they should take action to change them or scrap the policy entirely (EHRC, 2010). In 2012, just two years after a single Equality Act sought to bring together all the necessary legal protections (including race, gender, disability, age and sexual orientation) the prime minister announced that he was ‘calling time’ on EIAs (BBC News Online, 2012). As we have shown, this decision came a year after Cameron’s education department had introduced a new benchmark for achievement at age 16, the English Baccalaureate, that disproportionately disadvantaged Black Caribbean students and immediately widened the Black/White achievement gap. When the E.Bacc was introduced White students were more than twice as likely to achieve the new benchmark compared with their Black Caribbean peers (OR 2.2), a scale of inequality not seen since 2003 (see Figure 4). In effect, this single reform erased seven years of progress in narrowing the gap: so much for the ‘smart people in Whitehall who’ according to the Prime Minister ‘consider equalities issues while they're making the policy’. Clearly the government’s impact assessment (if it did one) was inadequate.<sup>[11]</sup> Our analysis of the Black/White gap over a quarter of a century suggests that this was not a one-off mistake or aberration. The same disproportionate impact accompanied the introduction of the ‘Gold Standard’ measure by a previous Labour administration. Our analysis highlights the fact that changes to the benchmark measure, intended to ‘raise the bar’, invariably widen existing race inequalities. But this is more than a call for serious impact assessments; the data signal the need to fundamentally rethink the ways in which policymakers and media commentators conceive of educational attainment in general and the Black/White achievement gap in particular.

There has been a tendency to assume that as ‘standards rise’ all students will share in the benefits of improving achievements. Indeed, this was precisely the argument made by Margaret Thatcher’s education secretary, Sir Keith Joseph, when he responded to the 1985 Swann Report by dismissing the need for targeted action on minority achievement (Gillborn, 1990, p. 166; Walters, 2012, p. 123). But our analysis of official statistics covering a quarter of a century tells a very different story; despite politicians periodically claiming success in ‘narrowing the gap’ (deploying a form of ‘gap talk’ now

seen internationally) the overall pattern is one of remarkable consistency. In terms of the original measure of success (five or more higher grade passes in any subject) the gap between White students and their Black Caribbean peers has indeed all but disappeared (Figure 1) but this is no longer the measure that matters. The benchmark has been redefined (twice) and each time the impact has been to widen the Black/White achievement gap.

- At the end of the 25 year span of data examined in this paper, the odds of White success relative to their Black peers, in the benchmark measures, have not changed substantially; from an odds ratio of 1.95 in 1988 to 1.73 in 2013.
- Throughout the whole period, White success has always been at least half as likely again; never less than the odds ratio of 1.56 recorded in 1999.

These differences in achievement are not meaningless statistical artefacts; they indicate genuine inequities that will have lasting consequences for Black young people as they navigate the worlds of employment and further/ higher education.

It would be wrong, however, to conclude that our analysis shows that little changes in the world of education. First, we should not lose sight of the huge improvements in educational attainment that have characterized the period. In 2013 a White student's chances of achieving at least five higher grade GCSEs was *eleven* times greater than in 1988; Black Caribbean students are *18* times more likely to achieve five higher grade passes than in 1988.<sup>[12]</sup> Unfortunately, because of changes in how the benchmark measure has been defined, achieving five higher grade passes (in any subject) no longer has the same significance and this points to a key finding, i.e. that changes to the headline measure of educational achievement have a decisive and immediate impact. In England to date such changes have had a marked regressive and racist impact; redefining the benchmark has led to a wider Black/White gap. In contrast, there is a much less predictable relationship between achievement inequalities and periods when policy appears to take race equality more seriously. We conclude that, so far as race equality and education policy is concerned, negative impacts are much more certain and predictable than attempts to make positive inroads in reducing race inequality.

At the beginning of this paper we posed a simple question; what has happened to the Black/White achievement gap over the last quarter of a century? Our analysis has shown that the ways in which the gap is measured by policymakers plays a crucial role in maintaining race inequity despite a pattern of rising achievement over time. This sheds further light on the wider question of how much has changed in education since the murder of Stephen Lawrence. The then prime minister's claim of 'monumental change' (Cameron, 2013) rings hollow and weak; our analysis suggests that the Black/White

achievement gap remains a persistent and important scar on the English educational system, one that is partly maintained by the actions of policymakers who periodically move the goalposts without regard for the racist impact of their decisions.

### **Acknowledgements**

This paper draws on research conducted for the project '*Race, Racism and Education: inequality, resilience and reform*', funded by the 2013 Research Award by the Society for Educational Studies (SES). We are especially grateful to our advisory group for their support and advice; especially Sir Keith Ajegbo, Hilary Cremin, Sally Tomlinson and Joy Warmington.

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## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> *'Race, Racism and Education: inequality, resilience and reform'* (Principal Investigator D. Gillborn) funded by the 2013 Research Award by the Society for Educational Studies (SES).
- <sup>2</sup> It should be remembered that the meanings of 'White' and 'Black', as social identifiers, are constantly in flux and reflect both historical and contemporary political processes (Ignatiev, 1995; Leonardo, 2009).
- <sup>3</sup> The term's popularity has even extended to the point where it is used to refer to any analysis that seeks to understand more than one dimension of inequality (see Strand, 2014).
- <sup>4</sup> DES 2014, table 2a.
- <sup>5</sup> Evans & Mellon, 2016.
- <sup>6</sup> We have explained (above) the reasons for our focus on the Black Caribbean group, not least because of their significance historically, politically and conceptually. Of course, this selection has advantages and disadvantages. The main advantage is the clarity of focus that is permitted but it should not be assumed that the group is homogeneous (cf. Rollock, et al., 2015). In addition, census categories rarely coincide precisely with changing everyday uses of race-related terminology. Students categorized as 'Black African' and/or 'Mixed: White/Black African' and 'Mixed: White/Black Caribbean' have been excluded from our analysis in this paper where the original source operates a disaggregation. Analyses of these groups is available in Gillborn et al., 2016.
- <sup>7</sup> The GCSE has undergone numerous changes since its introduction. Our analysis makes no assumptions about the nature of the examination itself; our focus is on who wins and who loses in terms of recorded levels of GCSE achievement, especially in relation to the benchmarks that are highlighted in policy texts.
- <sup>8</sup> For further details on the history and development of tiered GCSE examinations see Gillborn & Youdell, 2000, 98-112.
- <sup>9</sup> From 1994 an additional grade of A\* was introduced to help distinguish the very highest achieving students in each subject.
- <sup>10</sup> An OR of 1.0 would denote that White and Black students have an equal chance of attaining the benchmark. An OR *greater* than 1 denotes that White students are *more* likely to attain the benchmark while an OR *less* than 1 denotes a *lesser* chance of success compared with their Black peers. An OR of 2, for example, indicates that White students are twice as likely to achieve the benchmark compared with their Black peers.
- <sup>11</sup> When questioned directly on this matter the government's response, although unclear, suggests that no EIA was carried out in advance (*Hansard*, 2016).



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<sup>12</sup> Comparing White and Black attainment between 2013 and 1988 produces an odds ratio for White students of 11.15 and for Black Caribbean students 18.69.