

# **The School Experiences of Mixed Race White and Black Caribbean children in England**

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## **Abstract**

This research aims to explore the school experiences of mixed white/ black Caribbean children in English schools. The overarching findings of this research confirm that although the mixed race population as a whole is achieving above the national average, the mixed white/ black Caribbean group is consistently the lowest performing mixed race group in the country. Views of pupils, their parents and teachers in two London secondary schools suggest various reasons why mixed white/ black Caribbean pupils might continue to be the lowest performing mixed group in the country. These included experiences of marginalisation and invisibility in school life, the low expectations that teachers held about them, the lack of knowledge about how to support them at school and how all these issues were exacerbated by the friendship groups they mixed in. This research paper discusses these critical factors in detail and their implications for policy and further research.

**KEY WORDS:** mixed race; mixed white and black Caribbean; achievement; schooling; expectations

## **1. Introduction**

A review of previous longitudinal data and research suggests that the mixed race<sup>2</sup> population is one of the fastest growing ethnic minority groups in Britain, numbering 1.25 million in the 2011 census (Demie 2017; Tikly 2007). The Oxford demography group projection suggests that the mixed race group will be the largest minority group by 2071 (Coleman 2010). Recently available empirical evidence from schools confirms that the mixed race population has increased from 168,900 in 2003

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to 388,868 in 2017. This shows an increase of 130%. (See Table 1). Of the 388,868 mixed race pupils, 27% were White and Black Caribbean, 13% White and Black African, 23% White and Asian and 36% from any Other Mixed background. There was a marked growth of White and Black African at 243%, followed by a 172% growth in White and Asian, 136% Mixed Other background and 74% mixed white and Black Caribbean between 2003 and 2017 in schools across England.

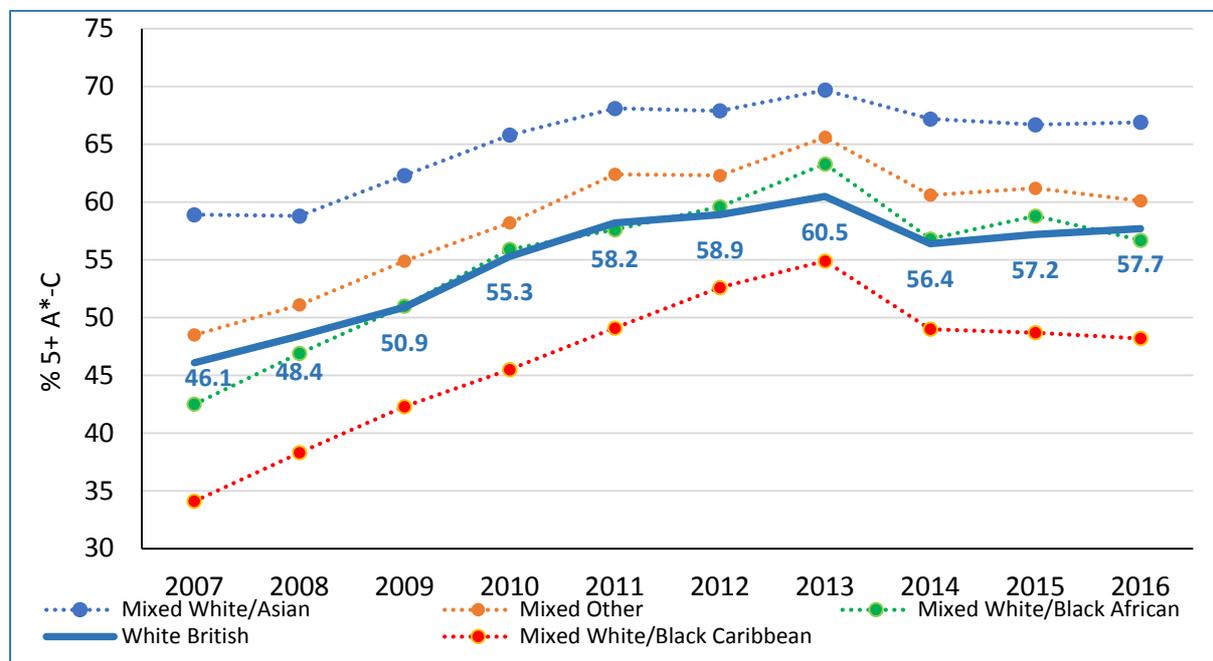
**Table 1. Number of Mixed Race Pupils in England Schools by Ethnic Heritage 2003-2017**

Year	Mixed Race Pupils by Ethnic Heritage				
	Mixed Race Total	White and Black Caribbean	White and Black African	White and Asian	Mixed Other
2003	168,900	60,700	15,000	33,300	60,000
2004	181,500	64,600	17,000	36,300	63,500
2005	190,670	67,850	19,160	38,200	65,450
2006	201,690	70,570	20,550	41,100	69,480
2007	215,110	73,790	22,240	44,370	74,730
2008	229,650	77,350	24,110	47,510	80,680
2009	242,850	79,530	25,830	50,800	86,700
2010	256,980	82,410	27,860	54,610	92,110
2011	274,770	86,325	30,730	59,340	98,385
2012	290,560	89,225	33,535	64,020	103,770
2013	306,890	92,505	36,730	68,605	109,060
2014	325,140	95,785	40,245	73,555	115,560
2015	344,747	98,520	43,995	78,694	123,538
2016	364,585	101,676	47,565	84,240	131,104
2017	388,868	105,408	51,404	90,632	141,424
<b>% of Mixed Race Cohort</b>	100%	27%	13%	23%	36%
<b>% Growth</b>	130%	74%	243%	172%	136%

Despite a rise in the mixed race population in general, a review of the research suggests that a lack of attention has been paid to children's attainment in schools. We would argue that the use of data to monitor the attainment of mixed race children is not well developed and as a result schools have limited awareness surrounding the attainment of this group in the national curriculum. However, national data confirms that not all mixed race groups had equal shares in the overall improvement in

attainment at the 5+A\*-C level (See Figure 1) in England. Although, data shows that mixed race children overall as a group, have been achieving above the national average, once these figures are disaggregated, there are notable variations in attainment based on ethnicity among the lowest achieving groups at GCSE (taken when pupils are aged between 14 and 16 and in Years 10 and 11). Table 2 and Figure 1 shows that 48% of mixed white and black Caribbean pupils achieved 5+ A\*-C including English and Maths compared to the national average of 58%. In contrast, mixed white and Asian pupils and mixed Other pupils were consistently achieving above the national average. Overall, the empirical evidence suggests that whilst mixed race children are achieving better than national average, the gap is bigger between mixed white and black Caribbeans and others.

**Figure 1. Mixed Race Students Achievement in England (% 5+A\*-C including English and Maths)**



Source: DfE. 2016. National Pupil Database (NPD), Department for Education.

A further analysis of mixed race pupil attainment by social background indicates that there is a marked difference in GCSE performance between pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) and the most economically advantaged groups in schools (see Table 2). At the end of secondary education, 38% of mixed race pupils on FSM achieved 5+A\*-C including English and Maths. Within this group,

only 32% of Mixed White and Black Caribbean pupils who were eligible for FSM achieved the measure and were the lowest attainers along with White British FSM and Black Caribbean FSM. There is a significant gap of 21% with those who were not eligible for FSM (53% 5+A\*-C including English and Maths), albeit this group were also performing below the national average, whereas for all other mixed race groups, those who were not eligible for FSM were above the national average. However, the evidence also shows that mixed Other, mixed white/black African and mixed White/Asian all had significant achievement gaps between their FSM and non-FSM pupils. The largest gap between FSM and non-FSM pupils in the mixed race cohorts were the mixed White/Asian group, with those who were not eligible for FSM performing at similar levels to the highest-achieving Indian and Chinese pupils.

**Table 2. GCSE Performance in England by main Ethnic Background and Social Background (%) 2016**

Ethnicity	% of pupils eligible for FSM	5+ A*-C including English and Maths			
		ALL	No FSM	FSM	Gap
Chinese	6%	78%	78%	75%	3%
Bangladeshi	30%	61%	64%	55%	9%
Indian	7%	72%	73%	55%	18%
Black African	24%	57%	60%	46%	14%
Mixed White and Black African	20%	57%	60%	43%	18%
Mixed White and Asian	14%	67%	71%	42%	30%
Pakistani	22%	52%	55%	41%	13%
Mixed Any Other Background	17%	60%	64%	40%	24%
Mixed Race - All	19%	58%	62%	38%	25%
Black Caribbean	23%	45%	48%	34%	14%
Mixed White and Black Caribbean	23%	48%	53%	32%	21%
White British	12%	58%	62%	28%	33%
Total- England	13%	58%	61.%	34%	28%

*Source: DfE. 2016. National Pupil Database (NPD), Department for Education.*

Overall the evidence from analyzing free school meals data is that Black Caribbean, Mixed White, Black Caribbean and White British pupils from low income households were the lowest performing

groups. The attainment gap between those pupils eligible for free school meals and those who are not is wider for White British and mixed race pupils than any other ethnic group.

## **2. Review of the Literature**

Despite the relative underachievement of some mixed groups in UK schools, there remains little research into their experiences at school. This is important as whilst the mixed population grows, mixed white and black Caribbean children are still underachieving and it is important to explore whether the experiences they have in school contribute to this underachievement. A small body of scholarly research into the school experiences of the mixed race population has been slowly growing over the past few decades in both the UK and US and emerging themes include the invisibility of mixed heritage children at school; teachers' perceptions about mixed heritage children and their lack of knowledge about how to support them at school and teachers' and parents' expectations of mixed heritage children's schooling.

Although academic success might depend on a positive racial and ethnic identity, mixed race identities are often invisible in the classroom and not affirmed in school life. An obstacle to raising mixed race pupils' achievement at school is the failure of the National Curriculum to adequately reflect the needs of a diverse, multi-ethnic society (Demie and Mclean 2017; Demie 2005). All Government education reform acts and white papers fail to explore the specific needs of mixed race pupils and they are similarly overlooked in the school curriculum and policies. This renders teachers unaware of mixed children's needs and any challenges they might face (Williams 2009; Morley 2016; Lewis 2016; Demie and Christabel 2017). Another reason that mixed children are invisible is that they are subject to inaccurate racial categorisation which often does not match the way in which they categorise themselves (Williams 2011, 2017; Song 2015). Various researchers (Dewan 2008; Tutweiler 2016; Lewis 2016) have highlighted a discrepancy between the ways in which mixed race people view themselves and the ways in which they are viewed by others, often as '*either black or mono-racial*' (Dewan 2008:64). Therefore, if children are categorised as black, rendering their identities marginalised and invisible in the school system, it is unsurprising that

despite their growth in numbers, little is still known about their experiences at school and little is done to support their achievement at school.

Most recent research suggests that many teachers hold low expectations of mixed white/ black Caribbean children and that conscious or unconscious stereotypes and assumptions about them can impact negatively on their achievement at school (Lewis 2016; Demie and Mclean 2017). This builds on an earlier study when Tikly et al. (2004) reported a variety of negative perceptions held by teachers who perceived this group to have 'identity issues' and like their black Caribbean counterparts to have behavioural problems at school. Similarly, Smith et al. (2011) highlight simplistic assumptions of connections between low social class, particular life styles and ways of living amongst mixed families which ignore the diversity of combinations of family structures. This includes an impression that mixed white/ black Caribbean children reside solely with white mothers who find it difficult to raise their racial self-esteem, and that the boys lack positive role models when fathers are 'off site' (Tikly et al. 2004). Not only do Smith et al. (2011) suggest that unemployment and low education are not a prominent feature of mixed families, the notion that fathers are simply 'absent' from their children's lives if they are non-resident is no longer assumed as readily as it was in the past as there are a range of ways that fathers can, and do contribute to their children's lives. Indeed, mothers seek, maintain and negotiate links with non-resident fathers and their families in order to provide a racial, cultural and familial awareness and belonging for their children (Caballero 2012).

Research also suggests that there is a lack of knowledge about how to support mixed race children generally in schools. Many teachers continue to struggle to come to terms with issues of mono heritage minority ethnic groups (Lewis 2016), let alone possible future ones targeted at mixed children. Despite parental concern about any 'additional difficulties' that might exist for their children at school, teachers were not aware of these concerns and their uncertainty about the treatment of minority ethnic children was most acute with mixed heritage children. This may be exacerbated by the fact that many feel there is already an over emphasis on the achievement of minority groups to the detriment of those from low socio economic backgrounds, such as white working class boys (Tikly 2007).

Evidence from national data suggest that mixed white/ black Caribbean children in England's schools are not sharing the higher educational standards achieved over the last decade in England (Demie and Hau 2017; Parsons 2016). Such evidence suggests concerns that, '*...White/Black Caribbean Pupils are the group most at risk of underachieving*' (Tikly et al, 2004:8) still persist and there is a need to undertake research into the experience of mixed race pupils and the impact these experiences have on their achievement at school.

### **3. Research questions and methods**

This study uses qualitative methods, which build on the empirical investigation of Key Stage 4 (KS4) GCSE examination data detailed in the introduction, to explore the experiences mixed white/ black Caribbean children had at school. Three research questions were asked:

- What are the school experiences of mixed white and black Caribbean pupils?
- To what extent are schools meeting their needs?
- What are the implications for policy and further research?

To answer the research questions, data from a wider research project (see Lewis 2013) was used which had explored the experiences that both mixed white/ black Caribbean and mixed white/ black African children had in two secondary schools in an inner London borough. Data used in this article are pertinent to the experiences of the mixed white/ black Caribbean children only. The research took place in two co-educational and ethnically diverse secondary schools in an inner London borough. They were chosen because they had the highest number of mixed white and black Caribbean heritage on roll. In one school, which included mainly black African, black Caribbean and Portuguese children, 4% of the school population claimed a mixed heritage identity. In the second school, 65% of the children were from a black Caribbean and black African background and 7% claimed a mixed heritage identity.

Exploratory discussion took place with nine parents of mixed race children. Four described themselves as white British with mixed white/ black Caribbean children and one as black Trinidadian

with mixed white/ black Caribbean children. Discussion enabled trust to develop which was important as some participants shared personal experiences which sometimes involved issues of racism and family rejection. As a white mother of a mixed white and black African child the lead researcher's capacity for empathy was useful in building rapport with participants but she was also aware that her own experiential knowledge of the subject informed her actions, decisions and research trajectory. Therefore, findings were not impartial, but value laden with inherent bias reflected by her background, status, beliefs, values and resources.

From exploratory discussion, a list of common experiences evolved which were used to design a schedule for a more structured approach with teachers and children. These included: identities; heritage; friendship groups; gender and the school curriculum. Twenty face to face semi-structured interviews were then used to collect views from educational professionals including nine senior managers, four teachers, four teaching assistants and three Local Authority education officers. Six of these were also parents of mixed white/ black Caribbean children; one was black Caribbean, the others white British. Four focus groups were conducted to gather the perspectives of fourteen mixed race children from Years nine, 10 and 11. Twelve of these children described themselves as having either a Jamaican parent (10) or a Caribbean parent (two) and only data pertinent to their experiences is used below.

Headteachers provided a schedule of 'useful people to see,' and delegated members of staff to approach children for focus group interviews. One selected children who she described as coming 'from a variety of socio economic backgrounds that would be willing to talk.' In both cases researchers were unaware of how representative children's views would be, wondering if those considered too 'shy' or unwilling to talk might also have had some interesting views to share. The views and experiences of children expressed in this research cannot therefore be generalised for all mixed white/ black Caribbean children in the two schools.

The project followed guidelines set out by the British Educational Research Association (2011) and was granted ethical approval from one researcher's institution. All participants were fully informed of the nature of the project, their right to anonymity and to withdrawal from the project at any time. If the

children were willing to take part in focus groups, further permission was sought from those who acted in guardianship.

At the request of the headteachers all interviews which took place in the two schools were not recorded. Therefore, handwritten notes were taken and transcribed in full as soon as possible after the interview.

#### **4. Results and Discussion**

Several themes organised by sub heading below, emerged from data detailing the experiences that mixed black Caribbean/ white children had in schools. They suggest that mixed white/ black Caribbean children were generally 'invisible' at school, absent from policy, curriculum and achievement monitoring. Teachers held perceptions about this group which often resulted in low expectations of their achievement at school. These factors were exacerbated by the fact that many socialized in black friendship groups, therefore more likely to be misrecognised as black by teachers and more vulnerable to the common stereotypes held about black children at school.

##### **4.1 Lack of attention to the identities of mixed race pupils and their the 'invisibility' at school**

Mixed race children were generally 'invisible' in school life, policy, achievement monitoring and the school curriculum. Echoing Williams's (2009) previous concerns about mixed children in the US, there was also confusion surrounding their classification. It was common for mixed children to have a range of classifications. As one interviewee asked: *'What do you mean by mixed race anyway? There's black mixes, white mixes...it depends on how you identify yourself'*.

Whilst children were 'selected' by senior managers to participate in the research based on their categorization as mixed on their initial school registration forms, for some this identification did not match the way they categorised themselves, or indeed the ways in which their parents categorised them in their real-life interactions (Song 2007). This caused confusion for teachers, one suggesting, *'it is often difficult to see who the mixed kids are. They just fit in whatever. Some come here and find friends based on interests, rather than race. You might not know as a member of staff whether they are*

*mixed race.* Most teachers assumed that mixed white/ black Caribbean children were black but others expressed a reluctance to make, *'assumptions from the colour of their skin about whether they are mixed race.'* One teacher suggested that some white mothers *'now classified their children as white because they had had a bad experience with dad, who was black.'* Another reason might have been a desire for their children to avoid the stereotyping and marginalization of black children in schools and indeed in wider public life. Many white parents in this study appeared aware of the stereotyping of black children; they spoke about their children's friendships with black children, suggesting that if their children were in learning, or friendship groups, with black children, it would have a negative impact on their experiences at school. Therefore, parents feared that teachers, *'lump together black and mixed race children in the same sentence'* (white father of mixed white/ black Jamaican pupil) and with these assumptions, *'confused children with their (teachers') comments'*. This father suggested:

*There's the issue that sometimes teachers view mixed race children as black. N came home and said that his teacher had said, 'I'm not very good at swimming because black people can't swim very well'. You know when you think, did I really hear that? We asked him to ask his teacher what she meant by it and he said it was because black people hadn't a long history of success in the Olympics in swimming. I did say well how is this applicable to you?*

Young people too expressed frustration at being pigeon holed into racial categories, (Song and Aspinall 2015) stating that various teachers, *'think I'm black,'* (Year 10 white/ black Jamaican girl), *based on their physical appearance.* These assumptions rendered them vulnerable to the negative perceptions and expectations that many teachers held about black children in schools. An Education Consultant suggested these assumptions stemmed from a, *'desire to put children into categories at school,'* reflecting Winn Tutwiler's (2016) suggestion that societies have a desire for 'uncomplicated divisions by race.' Teachers' confusions reflected Morley's (2016) concern that there was little recognition of mixed identities in their schools. Some of the girls in Year 10 suggested that their identities and needs were not discussed and that there was an inequitable focus on the needs of the Portuguese and Somali children who, *'get everything- group meetings and stuff; this school pays more attention to them. We don't get treated equally.'* (Year 10 white/ black Jamaican student)

Song (2015) highlights the importance of context and time to the ways in which mixed people identify themselves, describing identity as fluid without commitment to one race. Children in this research

identified themselves differently in different phases, based on both age and friendship group. A white teacher shared her observations of her own white/ black Jamaican son moving between different groups at different ages. She suggests that, '*culturally, mixed race children might find difficulty defining themselves and in different phases get drawn in different directions*'. Meanwhile, a white father said of his mixed white/ black Caribbean son:

*His identity changes according to who he's with. When I take him to East London for the school football team- when he's with the Year 6 team there are a lot of Black African and Caribbean boys and he changes the way he speaks and behaves- whether he feels that he needs to fit in, into a different identity.*

As Williams (2009) suggests, teachers highlighted difficulties in monitoring the academic progress of mixed children at school, because they were a small group and did not show in '*data streams*'. Despite national data highlighting a gap between mixed white/ black Caribbean children's and others' performance in England's schools (Demie and Hau 2017; Parsons 2016), the gap was not obvious and therefore little was done to support them. A secondary headteacher who suspected that mixed white/ black Caribbean children were '*underachieving*' in school, stated:

*It's not clear from the data that they are underachieving. The definition is fuzzy.... There is not a clear definition of mixed race. The group isn't easily defined. I suppose we are waiting for someone to come up with the term. I think the numbers in the school are relatively small. It's not obvious by looking at them.*

Similarly, a Local Authority adviser claimed that, '*our mixed race boys are underachieving. But they don't really show in the data.*'

#### **4.2 Lack of awareness of the needs and issues faced by Mixed White and Black Caribbean children**

A senior manager in one school highlighted concerns about a lack of awareness about this group suggesting:

*I'm not sure that all staff are aware of these issues (those related to the identity of the mixed children in the school). We had a chat about it two days ago because you were coming to talk to us, I wouldn't have singled these individuals out before.*

She added that, *'we don't have any initiatives particularly for mixed race children. We don't do anything to help mixed race identity. We do a lot about identity but this is the next layer- the dual identity.'* Teachers also felt there was little support for mixed identities in the school curriculum, one suggesting that, *'we don't do much for them- they all read the John Agard poem (Half Caste),* whilst another suggested, *'I suppose there aren't many images of mixed race people in the curriculum; it's just not talked about in school.'* Another argued: *It's not enough just having a mixed race writer come into school. Footballers don't help because they aren't recognised as mixed race; Ashley Cole is just talked about as black.'*

Furthermore, children from Year 9 suggested they rarely celebrated different cultures through assemblies or International days and learnt very little about 'the history of mixed race' at school:

*'We've learnt a bit about history- slaves and slave owners but not really to do with mixed race. (mixed white/ black Caribbean boy)*

*We don't learn about how mixed race people have developed- we know all about white and black history- the only history I know is about white slave owners that rape black people- we didn't talk about this in relation to mixed race people.'*  
(mixed white/ black Jamaican girl)

Such comments highlight a tendency for an increasingly Eurocentric curriculum to grossly underrepresent both mixed race and black Caribbean and African identities. That children should have such a limited and often uncritical exposure to their history and heritage highlights the failure of the National Curriculum to adequately reflect the needs of a diverse, multi-ethnic society (Demie and Mclean 2017).

Many children experienced name-calling, suggesting, *'People look at us because we are a different colour. They call us orio, coconut, mongrel, muffins, yellow. And grey, or elephant. They say confused.com about us like the advert.'* (Year 10 girl white/ black Jamaican). Many claimed that whilst teachers took name calling about black children very seriously, they *'laughed off'* name calling about

mixed children. Their head teacher agreed that teachers did let it pass, suggesting that it was: *'Just part of the vernacular'*. However, it had a negative impact on children's school performance, as several were regularly excluded from school because they reacted in an aggressive manner. This reflects a recent concern that mixed children in particular are experiencing a racism that is alive and well in the education system (Morley 2016).

Whilst teachers 'let it pass,' children were clear about the support that they needed:

*'We should have an assembly or something to talk about everybody cussing us.'*

(Year 10 white/ black Caribbean girl)

*'We could have a meeting once a month- a mixed race room, to say 'how's your month been, anybody called you anything this month?'* (Year 10 white/ black Jamaican girl)

During interview discussion, various education professionals recognised a need to support mixed race children. A learning mentor suggested:

*'There needs to be a session around mixed race- in our schools- what it means to be mixed. I think there should be growth in support for mixed kids...discussion groups ...a chance to chat to each other in a safe space. It's been really good to have this discussion- I've never really talked much about this before. The more I talked the more I realised how important it is to have these conversations. I'm going to chat with some of the young people about this in some of our sessions- what it means to be mixed. I hadn't really thought of this before but it's an on-going issue.'*

Whilst safe spaces are important for mixed children to articulate their feelings without fear of ridicule, conversations about race and exclusion should be discussed openly, amongst all pupils, regardless of heritage in order that casual stereotypes are debunked.

#### **4.3 Teacher perceptions and expectations shape mixed white/ black Caribbean children's experiences at school**

A Local Authority Black and Ethnic Minority achievement adviser, herself mixed white/ black Caribbean, suggested that:

*The image of the white single mother on a council estate with the mixed race child; this is the deficit model, the fall-back position for underachievement- teachers say they (mixed race children) are poor children; they've got identity confusion; they've not got a strong identity but I don't talk to many mixed race children who have particular issues with their identity.*

Various comments illuminated this deficit model and echoed fears about teachers' perceptions about the home lives of mixed race children (Tikly et al. 2004; Caballero 2012). Although teaching assistants who knew children's families, referred to their strong sense of identity (Tikly et al. 2004; Caballero 2012), one white teacher remarked:

*I feel the mixed children here struggle with two identities, who they actually are. Parents from two different cultures, grandparents- I'm quarter this, quarter that- if they want to celebrate all of their identity- where does this place them? Our children want to celebrate who they are. They need an identity.*

A senior teacher also described how children had little knowledge of their mixed identities because they lived with their white mothers and had, 'no access to their black side'. Yet children reinforced suggestions (Caballero 2012; Harman 2012) that their mothers provided them with racial, cultural and familial awareness by 'cooking Jamaican food', encouraging them to listen to Jamaican music and negotiating ample support from the extended family on their fathers' sides and their own social networks which enabled access to Caribbean culture.

Parents of mixed race children discussed teachers' perceptions that led to low expectations of their children at school. One white father felt his mixed white/ black Caribbean son was stereotyped at school:

*I remember one parents' evening there was an Australian agency teacher. She said that she had put N on a table on his own, 'he talks a lot, he's difficult; there aren't many children like him in the school.' What did this mean? What many mixed race children? It was his year 2 year. He got Level 3 in reading and maths but she marked him down in writing, Level 2A.*

Similarly, a Local Authority adviser reflected on the underachievement of a group of secondary school mixed white/ Caribbean boys from what she described as 'the middle class families.'

*Teacher expectation...they don't differentiate between the black and mixed race kids. I think the teachers might see J, for example, as Caribbean. They don't really engage with the mixed thing, they make assumptions. Their parents are getting distressed about their boys' underachievement. These boys all got Level 4s and 5s (above the national average scores) at primary school. Teachers make assumptions.*

Such assumptions echo concerns (Smith et al. 2011 and Caballero 2012) that simplistic assumptions are made about the life styles of mixed families, especially those of lone mothers, recognised as facing challenges such as low income, poor housing and living in poor environments (Harman 2012). It also suggests that low expectations of black Caribbean boys in the education system (Demie and Mclean 2017) persist and influence those held about mixed white/ black Caribbean boys who are assumed to be black. Their assumptions fail to acknowledge the various combinations of life styles, aspirations and educational expectations parents of mixed and indeed black Caribbean pupils hold for their children.

The same local authority advisor suggested a need for schools to view children as individuals with different needs. She described how schools in her local authority assumed that all mixed white/ black Caribbean boys, whatever their 'home experience' needed pastoral care and provided them with support in this area rather than focusing on 'academic learning conversations' about their progress in school:

*They are very focused on the whole stop and search thing here, two or more black boys together.... They (black and mixed race) identify together, it's fuelled by shared anger. We talk to schools about the achievement gap being unacceptable but they focus instead on the pastoral mentoring. At one school they have a dad in who is a mentor and does work around 'what it means to be a black man'- but he isn't a teacher and does he understand the deadlines they are working with? This needs to be coupled with academic learning conversations.*

Teachers highlighted the influence that national headlines might have on teacher perceptions about and expectations of mixed white and black Caribbean children:

*We had all the support for black Caribbean boys. They're doing better here (in this school) but we don't hear about how well they are doing in the press. We know it in this school but nationally negative messages linger. Anything we do for them- it's like they don't feel like they are intelligent, they don't feel like they are doing well. For the*

*teaching profession, there is never a sense of closure with these projects. There is no declaration about this to say they're doing well. (Secondary English teacher)*

Children recalled teachers' perceptions of them at school. One mixed white/ black Caribbean girl, now in Year 9, recalled:

*When I was at primary school I was on the lowest table for maths- my mum kept complaining because she had me tested and I was like a 14 year old or something with maths...she was a white teacher and I think she just put me with all the black kids on the bottom table.*

Yet again such quotes portray an underlying acceptance of the casual stereotyping and marginalization of black children in schools and indeed in wider public life and echoes recent research which highlights low teacher expectations of mixed white/ black Caribbean as well as black Caribbean children at school (Lewis 2016; Demie and Mclean 2017).

#### **4.4 Mixed white/ black Caribbean children's friendship groups**

The invisibility of and perceptions about mixed white/ black Caribbean children were exacerbated by the fact that many mixed in black friendship groups. Although Bruegel (2006) suggests that friendships at primary school, and indeed in the early years of secondary school, tend to cross ethnic and faith divides, many children separated into friendships based on '*racial groupings*' by the time they reached Years 9 and 10. A teacher commented: '*I have noticed that in Years 7, 8 and 9 the friendship groups are very mixed, race wise. By Years 10 and 11 they tend to hang out more in their racial groups.*' This was supported by the children who suggested '*In Years 7/8- everybody's friends with anyone- then in year 10 and 11 you start splitting up along racial lines.*' (Year 9 mixed white/ black Caribbean boy)

Although it was suggested by one teacher that, '*mixed children might identify culturally with black but then maybe that's a South London thing,*' and another that it was inevitable that mixed children would identify with black groups because the, '*majority of the black community is more accepting; the white community just sees us as black whatever,*' one could argue that children lacked choice as many suggested that their teachers assumed that they were '*black anyway*' and they felt drawn to a black

friendship group through a sense of shared frustration at the perceptions and stereotypes that were made about them. Brueger (2006) suggests that children need a choice of friends from the same gender before they show any tendency to stick with children from the same ethnic background. This seemed to chime with the girls' experiences in this research. Many expressed surprise that boys in their schools would move towards friendships based on race, one stating, *'I just chose my friends because they were interested in the same things as me. I didn't even think about their colour,' and 'I'm just friends with all the girls in my class- we don't think about colour.'* This rendered many mixed boys in this research vulnerable to the discourses that circulate in schools limiting 'who' they can be as learners (Youdell 2006). A senior teacher suggested that:

*Naturally there are low expectations, probably more the case with long serving teachers. They have low expectations having lived through the underachievement debate. This is conveyed to the students, of course it is. As teachers, do we have low expectations of black Caribbean and mixed students as low achievers? Do parents? The media doesn't help here- the headlines- they don't publish the success stories.*

Meanwhile, a head teacher reported that, *'the problem is that they (mixed white/ black Caribbean and black Caribbean boys) get labelled with stereotypes. People might say to me of the 'black boy' group- 'they're hanging around outside the toilet'. I have to say, 'They're just talking, leave them.'*

A white mother, aware of the stereotypes held by teachers and fearful of the 'peer group effect' on her own son, suggested that the secondary school transfer processes disrupted his pre-existing inter-ethnic friendships (Bruegel 2006), which had a detrimental affect on his school performance:

*At primary school, there were no concerns. He went off to E Secondary School with his tutor group who were mainly white middle class kids- he was in the top sets. Then in Years 8 and 9 he became friendly with the black boys- he started to go down the groups. His grades went down; he slipped to the ...well not quite the bottom groups.*

She also suggested that her son *'wanted to explore his black side, he was at that age; he had his white side at home but not the black- his dad told me it would happen, he turned his back on his whiteness to explore his black identity.'* Assumptions that the mixed race child is marginalised or confused about their identity (Crippen and Brew 2007) led to assumptions amongst teachers that, *'the mixed race....they have the identity thing on top.'* A senior teacher suggested that some mixed white/ black

Caribbean boys *'spend their entire time trying to fit into black groups'* to 'belong' or as suggested above through a sense of shared anger. She described how:

*Mixed race boys particularly over identify with black street culture; sometimes the negative sides of it, being in gangs, rap music. You can see it in the way that it is portrayed, their behaviour, the outward signs- dress codes- they have the biggest afros in the school, so big that they can't fit through the door. I can think of some boys straight away, coming into school, hats, headphones. This identity is important. It's to fit in.*

Furthermore, a Year 10 girl, referring to mixed race girls and boys that she knew, suggested that they join 'gangs' because, *'they are lost and it gives them an identity.'* She said: *'If it's a black gang and they become black that's then how they live the rest of their life- as a black person'.*

The movement of mixed children towards racial groups had implications for some who felt left out and confused. One white/ black Caribbean Year 9 boy said that, *'Sometimes I feel left out- I don't know who to be friends with- (there are) not many mixed race here. I just feel different'.* Similarly, a teaching assistant observed that some mixed children seemed marginalised:

*The school is very diverse but when I see mixed race students they sometimes don't know where to place themselves. Some look very subdued or quiet or they are the alpha male or female- doesn't seem to be anything in between. If it's not talked about they can be subdued.'*

Such assumptions about mixed race children's 'identity issues' have been found in numerous studies to be an inaccurate portrayal of children's identities (Tikly, 2004; Caballero 2012; Lewis 2016).

## **5. Conclusion and implications for policy and research**

This research presents national data which shows that although overall mixed race children have been achieving above the national average, there are variations in attainment which reveal that mixed black Caribbean/ white pupils are one of the lowest achieving groups at GCSE. The difference between their educational performance and others is larger than for any other ethnic group.

An Education Adviser suggested that, *'what might come out of your research is that it's the schools and systems that need to reflect on their practice.'* It would certainly appear that there are various

reasons why mixed white/ black Caribbean children underachieve at school. We would argue that the use of data to monitor their attainment is not well developed and as a result schools are unaware of their underachievement in the national curriculum. Mixed white/ black Caribbean children were also 'invisible' in school life, which led some to feel marginalised within the school community. Teachers often held inaccurate perceptions about their home lives and their identities and low expectations of them at school were exacerbated by the fact that many were assumed to be black. This also exposed the ways in which black children, especially black boys, are stereotyped in the education system, as disengaged from learning and therefore hard to educate. It seemed that white parents of mixed white/ black Caribbean children were acutely aware of these assumptions and were therefore keen for their children not to be viewed as black. This suggests an urgent need to increase our understanding of the factors lying behind teachers' low expectations of these and other ethnic minorities in classroom. Many teachers, as is the case elsewhere in Europe and the US, lacked knowledge about how to support this group at school. There was also a lack of targeted support to raise achievement and a failure of central government and schools to recognise that this group has specific needs that are not being met by the school system. Furthermore, it appeared that curriculum content does not acknowledge mixed identities and that there is a failure to stimulate an awareness of mixed race students and their families.

We recognise that this research is limited in its scope; it outlines the experiences of mixed white/ black Caribbean children in two south London secondary schools. It does not explore the specific experiences of other groups, such as mixed white/ black African children, mixed white/Asian, mixed race and the relative impact on their achievement at school in England. This would certainly warrant further research. Neither does it consider the experiences that mixed white/ black Caribbean children have in schools nationally which might have lower numbers of children from ethnic minority backgrounds, and the impact that these would have on their achievement at school. Children in these schools are less likely to become 'invisible' in black friendship groups and maybe less vulnerable to the low expectations of black Caribbean children in the school. Any extension of our study using a longitudinal approach with a large sample has the potential to enhance our understanding of the achievement experience of mixed race pupils across England.

Nonetheless despite some of these limitations our study highlights that notions about race continue to shape children's experiences at school. As Ward (2014) suggests, although the struggle for identity resolves itself in young adulthood, experiences at secondary school have long term effects on people and teachers need to be more alert to the issues facing mixed white/ black Caribbean children. Therefore, as a minimum we suggest that schools foster universal respect for their pupils (Schwartz 1998) take seriously discriminatory behavior, by staff or pupils, towards mixed white/ black Caribbean children and that their policies reflect the procedures to do this. Furthermore, it is essential that schools monitor the attainment of individual children and detect patterns in underachievement such as those amongst mixed white children/ black Caribbean children and put in specific interventions targeted at them. As Chang (2014) suggests there is a need for educators to bring race as well as other social identities to the forefront of educators' pedagogical practices to be increasingly inclusive. It is imperative that teachers begin to examine how their own classroom practice is implicated in how children's identities are constructed, and that they also provide opportunities for discussion with the children themselves, so that the self-evident nature of these categories is unsettled. Such steps might change the assumptions that exist about mixed white/ black Caribbean children's experiences and attitudes to learning, which often predetermine their experiences at school.

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## **End Notes**

2. The term mixed race in official statistics is denoting to a person whose parents belong to White British and other racial or ethnic group. The existence of mixed ethnicity people is now officially acknowledged in statistics and it is the term used in the England and Wales Census which includes a section entitled 'Mixed.' This is split further into *White and Black Caribbean*, *White and Asian*, *White and Black African* and *Other Mixed*. The census was 'critical to putting mixed race on the national map' and as a result 'there is now a surge in the use of the terminology and scholarly interest in mixed race in UK.' (Aspinall 2015:5)

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