

# Race Ethnicity and Education

## *Audio Interview with David Gillborn, Editor*

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Interview Transcript

- 1. In *Racism and Education: Coincidence or Conspiracy* you argue that the education system in the UK is not designed to promote equality in education but rather maintain the achievement gap that exists between white pupils and pupils from minority backgrounds. What, in your view, are the next steps that should be taken to address this inequality?**

Before I talk about the steps can I just clarify a bit more on the levels argument? Because my argument isn't that policy tries to keep the gap at one particular level, my argument is that if you actually look at education policy you only get serious moves in education policy towards closing race gaps or gender gaps or the class gap when the current state of affairs becomes unmanageable. So after the Stephen Lawrence enquiry suddenly there was a focus on race and equality, people were being asked to explain what they were going to do about it. So suddenly there was a flurry of activity and there were moves to lessen the inequalities. Very quickly the spotlight went elsewhere, most of the rhetoric never turned into reality and, if anything, the inequalities didn't just stay at the same level they got bigger.

So my analysis is that policy seeks to maintain inequalities at manageable levels. Sometimes there will be a crisis which exposes that inequality and so in order to maintain the overall equilibrium something will have to be done but usually the spotlight moves on pretty quickly. So at the moment both the main political parties are talking about social mobility and the gap between the poor and other kids. There may or may not be meaningful moves on that but I'll bet you a sizeable amount that pretty quickly the policy spotlight will move somewhere else.

So I think what policy is about is basically maintaining equilibrium and policymakers are not serious about removing race inequality. If policymakers wanted to remove race inequality they could do it. The thing is, addressing race inequality is going to annoy a lot of vested interests, in particular a lot of White people who will resent the fact that the focus is going on children other than their own. So when you actually look at current education policy in England, although people say well we want to close all the gaps, including the race gap, actually the central things that policymakers talk about we know from 20-odd years of research are likely to make the situation worse not better.

So both main political parties talk about more 'setting by ability'. Well we know that when you ask teachers to rank kids according to some notion of ability or motivation, Black students are disproportionately put in the bottom groups where they cover less of the curriculum, usually have teachers who are less experienced and surprise surprise they make less progress. Now we know that, we know that setting by ability systematically disadvantages Black kids and yet both major political parties tell us that setting by ability is good news for everyone.

Gifted and talented is a classic example. When that was brought in as a national initiative lots of anti-racists warned that because teachers' assumptions about ability are racialised, if you bring in a gifted and talented scheme you will be promoting a disproportionate number of White kids and the department for education said, "No, no, that won't happen" and then when the first statistics were published something like 1 in 10 White kids were called gifted and talented as opposed to 1 in 25 Black Caribbean and 1 in 50 Black African kids. So then there's suddenly a panic about: "Oh well, this can't be right, what are we going to do about it?" Well, if you'd have actually taken race inequality seriously you would have listened to the people who were telling you what you were planning originally was going to have racist consequences.

So actually if you look at the history of race and education in this country, whenever there's a move on race, usually it's won through protest. Policymakers never ever wake up and decide to be less oppressive than they were. They're pushed into it through protest and organised protests usually involving communities and professionals and often in the race field involving bloodshed. If you actually look back at when things have really changed it's usually because somebody's died and that death exposes the state of affairs. And then you'll have a kind of scattergun approach where there'll be two or three or four kind of 'add-ons' so we'll have a special initiative here, a special initiative there. And they're all short term and they all disappear after four years. Meanwhile, the kind of 'juggernaut' of the main policies continues unabated generating more and more race inequality.

So, you know, politicians tell us we want inclusion and social justice but no political party in this country has ever supported enforcing a kind of upper limit of how many minoritised kids can be expelled from school even though we know that particular groups are over-excluded. And actually at the moment both political parties are vying with each other to be tougher and tougher on discipline and the Conservative Party is advocating removing all limits on exclusions, they say they want to trust head teachers and they will remove the right of appeal to local authorities. Well, all the previous research on race and exclusion suggests that the losers in that will be Black students. Lewis Hamilton was excluded from school when he was a teenager and only got back in school because the local authority upheld an appeal. Well, under the Conservative proposals Lewis Hamilton would be excluded from school and would have no right of appeal.

## **2. How have recent educational reforms in the UK, particularly the publication of school league tables, affected the achievement gap?**

Deborah Youdell and I wrote a book in 2000 called *Rationing Education* that looked at how all of the different reforms, the GCSE, the publication of league tables, how all these different reforms came together in two inner city schools. And the book was called *Rationing Education* because what we saw was that schools were having to choose where to put their resources. They were identifying which kids would repay extra effort on their part and at the time that we wrote the book this all seemed like a revelation to people whereas now everybody talks about it as if it's obvious. We talked about these D to C conversion classes; that schools would identify the kids they thought were just going to miss five As-C and would then put extra resources into them. And in fact, the government even advocates that now as a strategy for improving performance in the league tables.

The problem is, the way in which schools identify ability means that Black students, regardless of their social class background, are likely to be seen as academically weak and White working class kids are especially likely to be seen as academically weak, or as not having the kind of motivation that will sustain them.

So, I mean, what we found in that study was that middle class White kids in particular benefited from those additional classes because it acted as a kind of safety net. It's almost impossible for White middle class kids not to get five As-C because schools view them as absolutely having that ability and will throw all kinds of resources at making sure they hit the targets where they'll look at an African-Caribbean student and actually begin usually from an assumption that, well, maybe this kid's not going to hit five As-C. So, you know, they're in the bottom set so why should we waste time trying to get them to five As-C? We'll give them some other course to do and we'll focus on the kids we think have the ability. The problem is that, you know, notions of ability are gendered and raced and classed and they work in different ways.

For some minority groups it actually works the other way. So, there's been some research published recently that suggests that most White teachers view Chinese students as kind of automatically gifted; that the average Chinese student is expected to excel in science and maths. And there's an expectation that their family will be amazingly motivated and incredibly supportive, a kind of mirror image of the expectations that Black kids have. But that doesn't mean that those Chinese kids don't experience racism; they experience other kinds of racism from teachers and from students but they tend to do really well in school because the school looks at them as a dead cert when it comes to the league tables.

But then people turn round to me and say well the system can't be racist because if it was racist Indian and Chinese kids wouldn't do as well as they do, how can it be racist? But if White people actually stop and think about that question it becomes obvious; because White people have different stereotypes about different groups. It's really obvious how a system could be racist and still have Chinese kids doing best.

I mean if you look at some of the classic IQ research some of the crudest, most mind-blowing work in the IQ field actually argues that what they call 'Oriental peoples' are genetically predisposed to being academically gifted, just as, they argue, Black people are genetically predisposed to being, you know, really good at sport. And this stuff is funded by think tanks in the States to the tune of millions of dollars. It's really incredible stuff. And no matter how many times you debunk it the think tanks come back with another study and the media talk about it and love it. Research on race and IQ is characterised by being scientifically unsound, often funded by right wing organisations and racist to its core.

### **3. How do cultural stereotypes and perceptions of minorities affect the educational expectations experienced by non-White pupils?**

The whole model minorities issue is an important one. That no group experiences a kind of static set of experiences, things are always changing. If you look at work from 20 years ago that looked at South Asian kids the dominant stereotypes in English schools would be that South Asian kids, in comparison with Black African kids, were better behaved, more motivated, their families were more stable. Now, post 9/11 and the London bombings, particularly Muslim kids, are seen as, you know, a dangerous presence and they're involved in gangs, that their parents can't be assumed to be supportive of the British way of life. So that stereotype has switched round very quickly.

At the other extreme you have what are sometimes called 'model minorities' which in the UK would be particularly Chinese and Indian students who are seen as disproving the argument that there's racism in the system because they're clearly minoritised groups and yet they, on average, do much better than White kids. But when you actually look at what happens to them in the system they experience a different set of stereotypes. So, academically, there's an assumption in many teachers that Chinese kids will automatically excel, which is good news for them in terms of getting in the top sets but very much negative in terms of the ways in which teachers interact with them and their experiences with peers.

So racism is a lot more complicated certainly than White people tend to assume. White people hear the word racism and they assume you're talking about the Klu Klux Klan and the BNP, they don't imagine that you're talking about nice, well-intended professionals, like themselves, and yet that's the core group through which institutional racism operates and that's the racism that really defines the system.

**4. In your 2000 report, *Educational inequality: mapping race, class and gender* you found that Black pupils often enter school better prepared and outperforming every other group but fall behind as they move through the system. How does the UK education system fail Black pupils and what are the major changes that need to be made?**

The evidence suggests that Black students are disadvantaged pretty much the moment they enter school, they find themselves in tracks or tiers or bands where the full range of exams aren't available. Most of these things are completely hidden from view from parents but it actually becomes impossible, literally impossible, for kids to sometimes do well in exams because they simply haven't been able to access the curriculum because they've been on a downward trajectory from the moment they entered school.

Now the truly horrendous, scary thing, is that that finding in the 2000 report that Black kids were going in, the data that's often quoted is a particular, very large LEA that had ethnically-based data as young as aged five and it showed that Black kids were the highest achieving in that authority. Since we did that report, there's now a new nationwide form of assessment for five-year-olds and it's entirely done by their teachers and, surprise surprise, White kids are now the highest achieving group. Now you could have predicted that on the basis of the previous research, but the system was brought in, wasn't interrogated for its likely impacts on race and now under this new system, White kids do better than all other ethnic groups. And as far as I'm aware there's been no formal investigation. I've spoken to people at the Department for Education, I've said, "Look, if you stand back from this, we have a situation where Black students, according to the available evidence, used to be doing at least as well if not better than White kids when they came into school, you've changed the form of assessment and now Black kids have gone back to being where you expected them to be, which is below average. That happened overnight. What happened, did Black kids suddenly stop being interested in school, or is it something to do with the assessment? There's been no formal response and no formal investigation.

So that's another way in which racism operates. I'm not saying that the policymakers and the people doing the assessments sat down and said, "How do we change this to disadvantage the Black kids?" I'm saying that if a group like that sits down and doesn't consciously say, "What about race equality?", the decisions they make will

tend, on average, to advantage White kids, really advantage middle class White kids and disadvantage certain minoritised groups, especially Black kids and it's a classic example of that. You have a new assessment brought in with no thought for how it's going to affect different minoritised groups and it has the racist impact that we could have predicted. And no action is taken.

**5. For researchers, students and professionals who have never encountered *Race Ethnicity and Education*, what is the journal about in a nutshell?**

It's a scholarly journal focuses in particular on issues around race and racism in education, and we take education very broadly so it's not only in schools; it can be in universities, it can be in community-based groups, youth organisations, anything that broadly relates to questions around education and the operation of race and racism.

Very wide ranging qualitative, quantitative, lots of different disciplines but the work is really united by the fact that it tries to advance a kind of critical understanding. So it's not just descriptive articles about a particular project or a kind of curriculum innovation. We don't publish curriculum materials. The work has to be a serious scholarly engagement, usually with issues around inequality and trying to advance an understanding on those things.

The journal started because there was an awful lot of good research in the area that people couldn't get published because issues around race and racism are seen as political or too specialised. So there was an awful lot of really good research that people couldn't get hold of because other journals were seeing racism as being too much of a political issue for them. So I guess the central aim of the journal is to be a place for the best research that tries to understand and provide a basis for opposing racism in education.

I try and keep a really, although I've been the editor since it started, I try and make sure that the journal isn't a reflection of things that I like. So sometimes the journal publishes papers that I personally don't find particularly interesting and sometimes the referees want revisions or changes to papers that I think are some of the best things I've ever read. So it's not *my* journal in the sense that I shape what goes in. Everything is refereed by at least two people and so sometimes things surprise me, things take off as an area that I didn't think was a particularly hot issue at the moment and then it'll really take off.

Other things I think the journal tends to reflect are developments in the field, so at the moment the whole area of 'Whiteness' is a particular issue, trying to understand White identity, the interests and experiences of White people, how what seems normal to White folks often becomes a vehicle whereby racism gets legitimated and carried on.

Critical Race Theory has become a thing I think the journal is known for in some respects. It's a particular approach that started in the US and really wasn't known very well outside the United States and the journal started publishing CRT papers and has taken them, I think, to a broader audience.

Also we get quite a lot of papers about racism in universities, which isn't a field that many people write about in the UK but there's a large body of work on racism, particularly in North America, in Canada and the U.S., looking at how racism operates on campus between students, from students to lecturers, from lecturers to

students, issues around racism and student faculties and affiliations. So that's a much bigger area than I would have predicted when the journal started.

## **6. What do you think are the most controversial issues in contemporary debate and research in education that your journal seeks to address and how contentious is Critical Race Theory?**

I think everything in the journal is contentious from a certain perspective because the journal starts from an assumption that education is one of the key forums whereby racism operates and is legitimated. It can also be one of the key places where racism is opposed and taken apart. So I think a lot of the stuff that we publish would be seen as being contentious in the sense that it's raising difficult political issues but hopefully not contentious in the sense that the stuff isn't clearly scholarly.

When I started the journal I spoke to lots of people in different countries engaged in anti-racist work and the clearest message that they gave me was that *everything* in the journal has to stand up to scrutiny. So we publish an awful lot of qualitative research but one of the things that the referees are really hot on is how writers deal with their methods. So we publish a wide variety of work but it always has to meet standards of scholarly scrutiny because the first time you publish a sloppy paper everything else in the journal is then judged against that and the advice I was getting was in an area like race and anti-racism there are a lot of people who won't want the journal to succeed. So you have to select the best work and go with that.

Critical Race Theory is constantly surprising me. I mean I'm also involved in writing about CRT. I'm very active in trying to get more people outside of the States to engage with Critical Race Theory. I think at the moment it's still not really properly understood very widely outside of North America. It's beginning, more people are beginning to use it in the UK and Australia, in Europe, but I think it's still an area that people are becoming familiar with. So, I mean, the exciting thing about CRT is how the ideas shed new light on issues that seem familiar but can be understood I think better once you get to grips with some of the ideas in Critical Race Theory.

It's very much a developing area. It's not an area where there's one key writer and everything they say goes and they're fêted as being the be-all-and-end-all. It's very much an area that's constantly changing, there's debate between different parts of Critical Race Theory, there are lots of off-shoots as well but the work is characterised by serious engagement with racism and trying to do something against it.

There have been some critical responses against Critical Race Theory, particularly more orthodox Marxist writers don't like it because they think it deflects attention away from class but I think that's a kind of sideshow, in a sense of the real arguments. I think the really important work is definitely taking forward CRT and understanding how inequalities are currently made and what we can do about them.

I've done several keynote lectures where I try and explain to a non-American audience what Critical Race Theory is, where it came from, and also to expel some of the myths that people, particularly in this country, have. I'm constantly told by people with great authority that Critical Race Theory thinks that race is the cause of everything. That's absolute rubbish. Critical Race Theory engages with class, gender, disability, so I try and expel some of those myths but one of the things I also do is when I start explaining where CRT came from, which is largely people of colour working in American law schools, I deliberately put up pictures of the key Critical Race Theorists and they're all people of colour, there aren't any White people. And I

did this once in a conference in Holland and several people came up to me afterwards. They didn't say it in the main meeting because, you know, people are watching each other and seeing what's being said, but several people said to me afterwards that it was really striking to be told about a theory and for that word 'theory' to be used about a body of work that isn't owned by White people. And you see that operate, I've done sessions where the majority audience have been White and, you know, in an hour's session on something called *Critical Race Theory* we'll end up having a massive argument about 'in what way is this a theory'? There's no engagement with the racism that's being opposed centrally in the work, it becomes a kind of academic argument about where do we draw the lines. "In what way is it a theory? What kind of theory is it? What kind of theory isn't it?"

Because I think if you actually engage with *Critical Race Theory* it's very unsettling. It raises really fundamental questions and in a lot of universities it's much nicer to have a kind of dry academic debate about the nature of theory than to actually engage with the real world. And that's one of the key points of contention because *Critical Race Theory* has this notion of what's sometimes called 'racial realism' which is, you know: "Don't have academic debates in a seminar room, engage with the real world. How do things work in the real world?" But, you know, there are lots of parts of the academy where you get points for being as detached as possible and if you start engaging with real world issues, that can be switched round and you're told you're being crude or simplistic.

## **7. What do you look for when considering articles and submissions?**

Well, good papers do tend to stand out quite quickly. They won't be overly long or ridiculously short, they'll have a title and an abstract that tells you what the paper is about. A good abstract will tell you what the key issue that's addressed is, it'll give you an idea of the methods that have been used and the conclusions that have been arrived at. So that abstract ought to tell someone whether it's worth them spending part of their life reading this paper. If the abstract doesn't do that the chances are the paper will have further weaknesses.

The main reasons why things are rejected from the journal are very consistent. I mean I've read thousands of refereed reports and almost always something that's rejected will fall foul of one of three things: the first thing is methods. If your paper covers any empirical research that you've done whether it's a survey, interviews, participant observations, even if it's desk-based research that you've analysed previous work, you have to tell the reader something about your methods. It doesn't mean that the whole paper has to be devoted to that but you have to give the reader a sense of whether they can trust you. How did you decide your sample, what were the key questions you were looking at? Because the reader needs to know that basic information in order to make sense of the rest of the paper.

So in addition to method you also need some awareness of what's gone before. Again, you can't review the whole of the relevant literature but you have to give the reader some help. Tell them how what you're doing relates to key work that's gone before and, if possible, how are you extending that work? So sometimes we'll get a really good interesting piece of research but it's written as if no one has ever considered these questions before. Now, if the person had actually added a section which says here's the work that had been done previously, it allows them to then show how they're building on that work.

So we need methods, we need an awareness of previous work and we really need the author to know what their point is. In lots of papers it's like the author hasn't really made their mind up, they've got three, sometimes four ideas and they're not quite sure whether the paper's about all of them or none of them. I think the strongest papers usually have one point to make and they make that point powerfully, with evidence, and they locate it within the field. Very often I'll get really interesting papers but they're not quite sure what they're saying and often those things just need to be started again because they're so disorganised that it's difficult to give clear advice on how you can change that. You know, you really need to sit down and work out what it is you're trying to say.

I mean, I often, with students and with authors, suggest that they think, "Who's the person I want to read this? Who am I addressing?" Whether it's an activist group in the community, the leading researcher in your field, someone who you want to give you a job. Imagine who that person is and then imagine that you've walked into an elevator at a conference or wherever, that person is in the elevator and the doors shut. You've got ninety seconds with that person before they get out of the elevator. What do you want to tell them about your research? You can't tell them everything about it, you can't, you know, spend three days telling them about the intricacies of French philosophy and how it relates to what you've just done. You've got ninety seconds; you need to work out what's important about your work that you can give someone in ninety seconds.

If you imagine that then you turn that into a paper. That will help you to identify 'what is it that I want to write about' and then you take that and all the rest of it flows from that. What's the appropriate title for the paper that shows people that are interested in this this is where you come to read about it. And then how do I structure the paper so that at the end of reading it the person feels they know exactly what I wanted them to get from that ninety seconds in the elevator.

It sounds silly, it sounds deceptively simple but actually most people that are writing they'll be writing up research that's taken a year, two, sometimes three years or more. Trying to actually distil that down into something that makes sense quickly is a really hard job and it's much better that you do it before you write rather than sitting down and starting with the first page and then seeing where it goes because that's where you wind up with those lengthy articles that never really get to a point, that just kind of talk around issues.

## **8. What are the most common mistakes made by writers?**

Almost everything that's rejected from the journal has fallen foul on the basis that it hasn't discussed its methods appropriately, or it hasn't recognised that there is a relevant literature out there which needs to be addressed, or it hasn't been clear about what its key argument is.

Sometimes people will write to me as the editor before they send me something, they'll send me an abstract and quite often they'll be saying is this relevant to the journal and I almost always will write back with some version of those three pointers, just saying well you know, this looks like a really interesting thing, however, it's not clear from this the kind of data you're using. You must remember to include a section that explores where the data came from, how you got it, why you got it in that form. And quite often that'll save people six months of backwards and forwards with referees because these things are, they seem obvious when somebody's said it. So, you know, my advice to authors thinking of sending something, not just to this journal

but to any journal, would be look at past issues of the journal. See what kinds of things are published, I mean basically identify the papers that you think are the strongest papers. So everyone has certain papers that they think are amongst the key things in their field. Well what sets those papers apart? Look at how they've been constructed and then try and do the same.

### **9. Who do you feel are your readership, your core audience and how is your perception of this affected by online access?**

I think mainly the core audience for the journal would be people who are actively involved in research on race and racism in education. So they might be graduate students, researchers, lecturers, also people working in advocacy groups who use some of the work to give evidence to some of the points they're trying to make. But one of the problems in knowing the audience is the Internet. I mean, one of the great things about the journal is how many downloads there are.

The Internet is an interesting aspect of this because it's both an advantage and a disadvantage. The disadvantage of the Internet is that I have no way of knowing who's using the journal. The advantage is that people around the globe are using it. Thousands of articles are downloaded every year; it's taken in libraries right around the world. Something like Google™ Scholar now means that even if someone doesn't know the name of an article or the name of an author, if they're smart about the way they use their search facility they can unearth articles that will directly address their concerns and then either buy an individual article or access it through a university. I mean I think at the moment the journal has something like 50% more downloads each year than the average for education journals. So I think it's meeting a really important need but because of the nature of the Internet I rarely get to meet the folks that are using it. I see the people that are using it in the kind of traditional way; people at academic conferences and people who email me about the journal but it's clear from the Internet figures that, you know, there are thousands of people using the work that's in it who don't fit that traditional mould and I think that's the really powerful thing about that.

### **10. Can you tell us something about your new book *Racism and Education: Coincidence or Conspiracy?***

So the argument in my new book is that when you look at the history of race and education in this country it operates in a way which has all the central hallmarks of a conspiracy as conspiracy is understood in law. I'm not talking about a Hollywood conspiracy where everybody goes into a room and shakes hands on a deal, that's not conspiracy in the real world. If you look at how the law identifies conspiracy, say between multinationals, they identify it on the basis of what's called 'concerted practices'. So a set of actions which all benefit a particular identifiable group. And if you look at how higher education operates the decisions tend to benefit particular groups and the groups that always benefit are White middle class groups. On average the groups that are systematically disadvantaged are minoritised students, particularly Black kids.

So you can have conspiracies without a secret meeting and you can identify them through the ways in which decisions are made and who are constantly the beneficiaries of decisions. If you start looking at education policy in that way it actually becomes pretty easy to view education policy as a conspiracy which systematically disadvantages Black students.