Gender-blind racism in the experience of schooling and identity formation

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Research on pupils' responses to schooling has been greatly influenced by work on resistance (Wills, 1977; Giroux, 1983), feminist research on female adolescents (McRobbie, 1978; Anyon, 1983; Davies, 1984) and the theorizing of 'race' and schooling (Wright, 1987a,b, 1992; Mac an Ghaill, 1988; Gilborn, 1990). Work has begun to detail the production of early masculinities through the exploration of male pupils' responses to school (Connell, 1989; Mac an Ghaill, 1995). School masculinities have also been linked with constructs of 'race' (Sewell, 1997). Thus, there now exists a plethora of research on both gendered and racialized processes of teacher/school stereotyping and pupils resistance and contestation in schools. These various pieces of research have provided important theoretical and empirical insights into the experiences of African-Caribbean and Asian pupils in school. However, in neglecting specific aspects of the interrelation of 'race' and gender in Black pupil identities, some theorists have only offered a partial view of racialized pupils' responses. The focus on 'race' and schooling, as with other research on Black subcultural forms, has too often concentrated on the experiences of black males, thus equating black identities and forms of resistance with masculinity (Mama, 1995; Weekes, 1996). Similarly, the current educational climate has highlighted the increasing exclusion of African-Caribbean males from school, and focused on the anti-school attitudes of black male pupils. This entirely neglects the important work that has shown black pupils' pro- as well as anti-school responses within education (Fuller, 1982; Furlong, 1984; Sewell, 1997).... Important work is increasingly conducted on Black masculinities in schooling, but research needs to build on that of Mirza (1992), Fuller (1982) and Riley (1985) to address how schools also produce black femininities. Feminist work in this area has tended to subsume the construct of 'race' within that of gender (McRobbie, 1978). Therefore, based on a study of school exclusions within five schools in a large education authority, this chapter explores the adaptations of both black male and female pupils to school, to teacher–pupil relationships and to the experience of school sanction.

The study

The data presented and discussed here are derived from a much broader ethnographic study of school exclusions conducted in a large local education authority in the Midlands. The aims were to explore and document the nature and pattern of secondary school exclusions of pupils from ethnic groups in general
and to identify the school processes which may lead to the exclusion of African-Caribbean pupils in particular. In brief, the study involved surveying all secondary schools in one county education authority, to assess the overall pattern of exclusions; extensive interviews with pupils and staff in five representative secondary schools; and additional interviews with a small group of African-Caribbean male pupils who had experienced permanent exclusion from school.

The bulk of the research was conducted within the five selected schools, which varied according to their local authority status, the characteristics of the local catchment area and the nature of their pupil intake. The schools were primarily selected according to the proportion of their pupils from ethnic backgrounds. Represented among the five selected for study were schools with low, average or higher than average proportions of African and African-Caribbean pupils. A total of 62 pupils and 52 members of teaching staff were interviewed from the five schools in the research sample. Of these pupils, 25 were of African-Caribbean/mixed parentage. The pupils interviewed were from Years 9 and 10 only (age range 13–15 years). As far as possible, nine pupils from each year group and an even mix of African-Caribbean, Asian and white pupils were selected for interview. The pupils were recruited for interview by Heads of Year, with each pupil selected either having previously been excluded from school, or having experienced a number of school sanctions (i.e. being withdrawn from lessons, referred to on-site units or placed on report). Three of the nine pupils from each year were white, three Asian and three African-Caribbean. The educational abilities of the pupils varied. In addition to these pupils, 11 African-Caribbean young people and their parents were also interviewed. These young people had experienced permanent and fixed period exclusions from other schools in the local authority.

Testimonies are provided below from the pupils and senior teachers at two out of the five schools that participated in the research. These testimonies have been used to highlight that the nature of the school attended had a certain influence on the adaptations of pupils to schooling and education that equally affected the responses of teaching staff to issues surrounding black pupil behaviour. The majority of the pupil testimonies are derived from African-Caribbean pupils. The schools will simply be referred to as A and B. School A was situated in the middle of a fairly wealthy suburb in the city, and performed very well within the education authority in terms of GCSE A—C grades obtained. The majority of the pupil population was drawn from the immediate area and, therefore, many of the pupils came from professional families. There was a small but increasing African-Caribbean and Asian population, both in the area and the school. School A was under local authority control. School B was situated near a fairly large housing estate in the centre of the city. It would take excluded pupils from a nearby technology school and had a greater number of Black and Asian pupils than school A. There was a greater focus on 'race' as illustrated by a number of displays on the walls. School B had recently introduced a new exclusion policy and was also under local authority control. The testimonies provided here are not intended to be representative. Indeed the study as a whole can only offer a snapshot of the nature of school exclusions as experienced by the participating teachers, pupils and their parents over a particular period of time.

Gendering 'race'

In looking at the responses of both minority ethnic male and female pupils to schooling, the chapter builds upon the work of black feminists who have historically argued for the interrelation of 'race' and gender in the exploration of black experiences (Collins, 1990; Mama, 1995). There is much scope within the area of secondary education for black feminist analysis (Mirza, 1992). However, for some black feminists, the need to focus on interrelating gender and 'race' within education has meant rejecting the way that mainstream feminism has subsumed constructs of 'race' within those of gender when exploring female pupils (Bryan et al., 1984). In view of this it has been argued that:

Black women cannot afford to look at our experience of Britain's educational system merely from our perspective as women: this would be to over-simplify the realities we face in the classroom. For black schoolgirls, sexism has, it is true, played an insidious role in our lives. It has influenced our already limited career choices and has scarred our already tarnished self-image. But it is racism that has determined the schools we can attend and the quality of the education we receive in them.

(Bryan et al., 1984, p. 58)

These are important considerations when exploring the experiences of black female pupils' in schools, particularly in relation to the way they may experience teacher stereotyping. However, if black feminist perspectives are to be made integral to an analysis of black female and male experiences within education, the complex ways in which gender and race intersect for black pupils, require examination. This includes an acknowledgement that gender is not restricted to the exploration of femininity and, therefore, that sexism is not the only modality through which gender is experienced.

[...]

Attempts to explain the differing adaptations of black male and female pupils to schooling have been rare. Mac an Ghaill's (1988) study of teacher pupil relations offered an analysis of the 'Black Sisters' — a group of high achieving African-Caribbean and Asian female students — and of the 'Rasta Heads' and 'Asian Warriors' who were male pupils at the school under study. Though that study provided a useful examination of gendered and racialized forms of pupil resistance, comparison was only made of the strategies adopted by the African-Caribbean and Asian males, since the 'Black Sisters' were older college students. But like the respondents in the work of Fuller (1982) and Mirza (1992), the 'Black Sisters' in Mac an Ghaill's (1988) study highlight the fact that strategies other than disaffection are open to black pupils. However, the experiences of the black female members of this group were not looked at explicitly. Other work has suggested that due to the prominence of female-headed households within many African-Caribbean families, and the participation of black women in the labour market, young black females acquire gendered identities which differ to those of both white females and black males (Phoenix, 1988). Such theorizing of gendered differences among black adolescents has been used to explain differing adaptations and rates of academic achievement (Woods, 1990). However, Mirza (1992) has criticized work which has attempted to explore the higher rates of academic achievement among African-Caribbean females, as often this work assumes that their motivation stems from their mothers' heightened commitment to occupational statuses, or, as in the work of Fuller (1982), suggests that black females wish to prove their self-worth both to parents and to black male peers. These theoretical assumptions position black women within the stereotype of the 'superwoman' and negate the experiences of
black females in families that are not female-headed. They also fail adequately to theorize the experiences of black males, through suggesting that they have negative attitudes towards black female peers, or reducing them to the status of absent black fathers.

Research on black pupils' adaptations to schooling has, however, pointed towards aspects of community life upon which black pupils are seen to draw in their schooling experiences. The relationship between black pupils and black communities must be viewed as a complex process of negotiation with cultural forms. Black pupils (particularly male) may reject the forms of knowledge available within schools and instead draw on alternative knowledge sources situated within their communities (Sewell, 1997). Conversely, teachers within schools have been documented as reducing the experience of black pupils precisely to these cultural community forms (Mac an Ghaill, 1988). To be viewed as exhibiting these cultural community forms, for example, may well inhibit a young male's educational opportunities within school. As Sewell (1997) argues within his study of black masculinities, teachers would refer to the musical forms consumed by many of the black males as an explanation for their aggression and anti-school behaviour. Within the study on which this paper is based, teachers suggested they understood that the behaviour of some black pupils was related to their experiences of racial attacks and abuse within their communities. However, these processes of understanding the experiences of black pupils can often be a read in pathological ways. The explanations offered by some teaching staff within our study indicated that they were attempting to understand, and hence counter, the difficulties that their pupils were experiencing. However, the link between black pupils' unacceptable behaviour at school and the explanation provided for this behaviour by their teacher was often quite tenuous.... Here a white male teacher attempts to provide his own theory as to why black and white pupils may experience school differently.

I have noticed that we have West Indian groups of lads, grouping together as Black kids and running around. I say running because they are ever so gregarious... that's a social thing as well, of course you get White kids but they don't seem to be [as] they... [black kids]'re always singing and dancing and they're much more physically expressive. Now that in itself makes them noticed more and they're really keen on developing an identity. And there's a special uniform that they wear and if they can help it, they'll get it into school... I mean even dreadlocks, that's fine, but when they're like walking around with scars across their face, with all of them hidden. That's fine, that's brilliant. Come into the classroom, coats off and sit down but they'll bring it into the classroom. And we've got one or two of these groups... 

What is important from the teacher's quote is that the discussion of racial identity is restricted to that of black males. Within the same school, a friendship group of Year 10 black females also existed alongside the male groupings. The response of the teacher cited above to issues of 'race' and the adaptation to schooling of black pupils generally, appeared to begin with a discussion of black masculinity. The work on schooling masculinities, which is a rapidly developing area of research, has arisen at least partly in response to the readiness with which schools define troublesome behaviour both as masculine and as increasingly racialized.

Much of the black male pupil response documented within these studies notes that reactions to schooling are based on the way that disaffection and disruption is equated with black masculinity (Mac an Ghaill, 1995; Sewell, 1997). Research has also drawn attention to the issue of black females responding in empathetic ways to the treatment they feel their African-Caribbean male peers experience within schools (Wright, 1985, 1987a,b; Mac an Ghaill, 1988). Additionally, Asian pupils often acknowledge the equating of African-Caribbean masculinity with disruption. They have also been shown to display identities that incorporate empathy for their peers (Mac an Ghaill, 1988; Gibbom, 1990).

The varying nature of these responses to schooling by racialized pupils needs to be explored. This will then provide a wider picture of black responses to the issue of school sanction and exclusion. In addition, the responses/behaviours of African-Caribbean and Asian students are examined in conjunction with the opinions of some of their senior teachers. [...] These accounts will illustrate that the issue of exclusion, and the environment and context within which it takes place, is fraught with tensions both for senior teachers and their pupils....

**Racializing school exclusions**

The concept of school exclusions has become heavily racialized over recent years. Research highlights the over representation of black pupils in exclusion statistics (Bourne et al., 1994; Parsons et al., 1995; OFSTED, 1996; Osler, 1997; Smith, 1998). Within the schools participating in the research, the issue of increasing exclusions of black pupils gave both teachers and pupils cause for great concern.... All head and senior teachers felt that school exclusion was an essential part of managing discipline and most would talk about the issue of increasing school exclusions in non-racial ways. However, the occurrence of fixed period exclusions in one particular school involved increasing numbers of black pupils, and though...
the discourse around the issue of exclusions was not racial, the representation of particular groups of pupils within the school's statistics clearly was. This was an issue that was clearly apparent to some of the black pupils interviewed, who felt that many of the sanctions available to the school were overused. However, where staff attempted to look at these issues in order to counter them, pupils rejected their efforts.

A while back there was loads of tension between black students and the teachers. They even setup a thing for black students where Mr Mills was there, and another teacher and he [headteacher] was like asking us why we was getting into so much trouble and stuff like this. And it happened once... and then they said "oh this is going to happen every week". Then the students were OK about it, well not OK about it, we were quite annoyed because it was just like black students... He said it was going to happen every week, and we had one. And that was ages ago, and it's not happened again.... There was so much going on with black students that something had to be done. The black students were getting into trouble, getting a bad reputation. The popular black students, they seem to get in more trouble than everybody else, it's like... if you're black in this school, you've got to be quiet, like a good little black person, you can't be popular. You're not allowed to be popular, and that's why they were getting so much trouble.

(Aaron, Year 10 pupil, school B)

The black pupils, whom Aaron speaks of, rejected being 'singled out' by the headteacher, yet wanted a forum within which they could discuss their experiences. The headteacher had racialized the issue of disruption and other pupils felt this negated his attempt to introduce 'discussions'. However, the headteacher felt that his efforts had had a positive effect on his pupils.

The number of black kids excluded has dropped right down. It will still be higher than the white pupils but again it's continued this term Who knows what the reason is for that? I'd like to believe that as a result of that meeting that black pupils feel we're concerned about them, that we don't want them to be excluded, whereas there might have been a perception before that they want to get rid of the black kids, we're always being excluded'. I just didn't know whether that was true or not I was talking to [a senior teacher] and she thought the meeting was a very positive one but I think she felt it wouldn't be a good thing to give a sense of identity to a certain group of pupils who are selected out as being in danger of exclusion. Because it's a labelling process.

(Headteacher school B)

The staff had felt the process of talking to the black pupils about the issue of discipline and exclusion had been positive. However, the advice given to the headteacher about the dangers of labelling a particular group of pupils illustrated that careful consideration had not been given to the exercise. The meeting itself, and changes in school behaviour policy had created tensions among some of the older black pupils, because of the way that discipline and school exclusion had seemingly become racialized:

Chantel: Do you know how many black pupils he's [the headteacher] excluded? Seventeen last time I looked. I was the first black girl to be excluded. It was all boys and then we... it was like we was putting up a stubborn way. If he spoke to us we would just walk off and kiss our teeth after him. He started excluding white people to style it out. He said 'we're going to kick all the clowns out'.

How have you all reacted to that?

Bad. Every time he speaks to us we don't listen to him. It makes us turn bad if you know what I mean. It like causes... [I mean] he calls everyone a clown and only excludes black people. He must think we'll react in a [certain] way to that. We're bound to react in a bad way.

In contrast, the headteacher spoke about his confusion as to why the need to exclude black pupils was continuing at the school, despite his attempts to address the issue, and failed to see that the pupils had perceived these attempts to be racially biased rather than helpful. Lines of communication had clearly broken down and conflict between staff and black pupils, often regardless of the racial background of the teacher, was invariably perceived to be racial by the pupils that we interviewed.

Differential experiences

Within this context of racialization it is possible to map out the differentiating responses of pupils to the threat of school exclusion. Chantel spoke of a response to the issue of exclusion that was not gender-specific. Indeed, some of the pupils in the study responded in a way that cut across their racial and gendered position. But for one of the young women interviewed, differences between male and female pupils were noted. Samantha, an African-Caribbean Year 10 pupil in school A, was also a member of a large group of students, who would often mix with the group of African-Caribbean males mentioned earlier by the teacher from school A. Her response to staff perceptions of her group and black pupils generally, was both one of concern and one that berated black male pupils for the way they would confront their teachers. Thus, she saw her response as different from those of her male peers.

Samantha: If someone starts on us, we'll start back... I think that's why the teachers have picked up on it. It's just got stupid now [because] if any little thing happens, it's 'those Year 10 girls'. Especially if there was a fight [and] all the black people are together... 'cause some of them are black, some of the teachers are intimidated by that as well because it's a big group and maybe they don't know how to deal with it or whatever. So the first instance [of anything]... [they say] 'right get inside, something's going to happen', and that's the only way they can deal with it.... And like with the boys as well, they're like half-caste and black. But they [boys] make it worse anyway cause, they just, they can't keep quiet, they just have to mouth off. They should just stand still and go 'hum' [imitates raising eyebrows at imaginary teacher] and talk about it later.

Researchers: Is that what you do?

That's the best way. Keep 'em sweet [imitates slowly nodding her head to imaginary teacher] and just like walk off.
Samantha realized that she was in a group that was viewed in a particular way by some staff. It is worth noting that the school had a small minority ethnic pupil population and many of these pupils were very close and spent much of their time with each other. Samantha also highlights that there are differential ways in which the African-Caribbean males and females respond to their construction as ‘problematic’. Samantha felt it important to talk with her peers and family members about interactions with teachers, whereas she felt that the boys were too eager to confront teachers with their complaints. However if involved in a disagreement, she would also engage in verbal interchange with subject teachers. The head of year group that Samantha was in also commented on the behaviour of the group of girls with whom Samantha was friendly.

Samantha is somebody who, at the moment, is giving me a lot of cause for concern. She's a bright girl. She's got a lot of potential. Causes an awful lot of problems with regard to friendships with other girls. Other girls can be at times quite intimidated and threatened by her. [She] has a little Mafia like friendship group around her, who when they move around school at times can make other children feel... [She] has been involved in fights at times. At the moment is against the system by being perpetually late... when challenged about it doesn't really understand why you are picking on her.

(Mrs Frank, Head of Year, school A)

The group of young women who were part of Samantha's peer group had similar qualities to those of the young black and white women called the 'Posse' in Mac an Ghaill's (1995) study. Pupils often reacted to Samantha and her friends on the basis of their reputation for fighting in the school, and Samantha felt that because of this, if another pupil attempted to provoke her, teachers would think them to be the innocent party. It is of interest that Mac an Ghaill should view the group of young women in his study as adapting to schooling in masculine ways. Connolly's (1995) work on masculinity illustrated that white male peers would attempt to provoke African-Caribbean male pupils who had 'fighting' reputations, to challenge their masculinities. The ability to fight in school, therefore, has specific masculine connotations. However, to equate the behaviour of Samantha and her friends with masculinity, reinforces specific 'controlling images' of black women as 'non-feminine' (Collins, 1990). These racialized stereotypes interact with those held by teachers generally of young women who subvert traditional definitions of femininity, as documented in feminist theorizing (Davies, 1984). That the young black women in this study, regardless of their racial background, talked about the ways they attempted to subvert the traditional relationship of teacher as powerful, student as powerless, the responses of the African-Caribbean and Asian pupils showed their awareness that exclusion here was perceived to be far greater by African-Caribbean pupils. Chantel talked above about her relationship with her headteacher. However, she also talked of a response where her interactions with staff made her feel powerless.

She's [teacher] got a big problem. She said something racist to me. I can't remember the words but I reported it and [the headteacher] says 'you'll find that Miss Beverly is not racist because she is in the black bullying group'. Sometimes we just go in the [section 11] room and cry our eyes out. We just cry, because we report it, report it and no one does anything. So they wonder why we turn bad.

[Mr Peters] ... only talked about the black male pupils he had observed:

Mr Peters (teacher, school A):

We 've got some black kids, and they see, not all, but a lot of them, to hang around with their own peers within a group. They have their own subculture. Try to bend the uniform so they can dress in whatever way and so when they're together, some of them don't perform as well as they should do, because, yet again, they want to be one of the boys. And they're bright, there's no problem in that respect, it's just they want to be different—that's understandable perhaps—but it does affect the way they learn. Perhaps they do see school differently to other people... they lads, really... lads more than the girls?

Researcher:

Mr Peters:

Oh yes. There's no problem with the girls at all. Year 7 lads will come in, they will see the Year 9 lads and want to be a member of that group.

Power and powerlessness

The black female pupil quoted above, who had developed a reputation equated with non-feminine behaviour, can be seen to derive relative forms of power from her position within the school. However, the nature of the power or powerlessness that pupils experienced as they attempted to respond to the racializing of sanctions and exclusion varied to a certain extent mediated through their gendered positions. Their responses related to their status as pupils within school, viewed in relation to teachers and the school in general. But as Riddell (1989, p. 184) has argued, 'for many pupils, education is experienced as a form of repression', and the area of school sanctions made this power relationship even more evident. Many of the pupils in the study, regardless of their racial background, talked about the ways they attempted to subvert the traditional relationship of teacher as powerful, student as powerless. The responses of the African-Caribbean and Asian pupils showed their awareness that power was also mediated through particular gendered and racialized concerns. Therefore, it would be simplistic to assume that these pupils reacted against an unequal power differential without acknowledging the way that their own racial and gendered backgrounds affected their experiences. [...]

The racialized tension within school B had placed an increased focus on the use of exclusion by senior members of staff. Hence, the possibility of experiencing an exclusion here was perceived to be far greater by African-Caribbean pupils. Chantel talked above about her relationship with her headteacher. However, she also talked of a response where her interactions with staff made her feel powerless.

(Chantel, Year 10 pupil, school B)
non-conformity, disruption and school sanction, contribute to the equating of 'race' with masculinity, which has important implications for theorizing how all pupils adapt to these processes. Clearly a black feminist perspective on this issue might interrogate the extent to which 'race' is the prominent feature in black pupil identities.

**Note**

1 Black refers to children who have at least one parent of African-Caribbean heritage.

**References**


