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## **The 'Wrong Subjects'? The racialised, gendered and classed exclusion of minority ethnic pupils from notions of educational success**

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### **Background**

In the United Kingdom, it has been argued that education policy is characterised by 'an obsession with academic achievement' (Mahony, 1998, p. 39). Or, perhaps more precisely, we might say that education policy is overwhelmingly concerned with the notion of underachievement. Indeed, significantly more media, policy and research attention seems to be directed at trying to measure, map and understand the potential causes (and 'cures') for underachievement as compared to 'success'. Whilst, undoubtedly, there are identifiable, racialised patterns of attainment among different 'ethnic groups', the picture is highly complex and nuanced (Gillborn & Mirza, 2000; Gillborn & Gipps, 1996; Archer & Francis, 2006). Indeed, the notion of 'an ethnic group' is in itself a complex and contested one, since the boundaries of ethnic collectivities are porous, shifting and contestable (Hall, 1990, 1992; Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992; Anthias, 2001). Racialised patterns of achievement are cross-cut by gender and social class and are shaped by histories of migration, arrival, settlement and schooling - and must, therefore, be treated with care. For example, whilst UK government statistics might indicate that, for example, pupils of Chinese ethnic origin tend to achieve among the highest examination results in England, this figure hides considerable patterns and variations within this 'group' (for instance by region of origin, social class, gender, school and subject). Moreover, a focus on attainment statistics alone can hide the inequalities and injustices experienced by 'achieving' pupils and can even feed into oppressive racist stereotypes of these pupils (see Archer & Francis, 2005b, 2006).

### **Research Questions**

This paper seeks to explicate the various ways in which dominant educational discourses around 'the ideal pupil' work to exclude minority ethnic pupils and prevent them from inhabiting a position of authentic 'success'. It examines how 'the successful pupil' is a desired, yet refused, subject position for many minority ethnic young people - even for those who are (to some extent) performing educational success.

The paper draws on interview data collected from two contrasting empirical studies that involved academically 'successful' (i.e. attaining) minority ethnic young people - British Chinese pupils and their parents (e.g. Archer & Francis 2007) and middle-class minority ethnic pupils, parents and young people (E.g. Archer 2010).

Findings are synthesised into a model (a 'trichotomy') to explain the ways in which discourses of 'race', gender and social class interact in complex and nuanced ways to position minority ethnic pupils as the 'wrong' sort of educational subject, irrespective of their levels of attainment.

The paper seeks to explain the ways in which discourses of 'race', gender and social class interact in complex and nuanced ways to position minority ethnic pupils as the 'wrong' sort of educational subject, irrespective of their levels of attainment and it asks how educationally 'successful' minority ethnic young people and their families negotiate and navigate their ways through schooling and how they attempt to reconcile the tensions and inequalities that they encounter.

### **Methods**

The paper draws on data collected as part of two separate empirical studies undertaken by the author, which looked at the identities and educational experiences of minority ethnic pupils who are

broadly identified with notions of attainment, namely the British Chinese (, and middle-class, minority ethnic parents, pupils and young professionals.

The British-Chinese Pupils project (e.g. Archer & Francis, 2007; Archer & Francis 2005a,b, 2006) was an ESRC funded study conducted with 80 British Chinese pupils aged 14-16 years (32 boys, 48 girls), 30 teachers and 30 Chinese parents (see also Francis & Archer, 2005a,b, c). Interviews focused on the young people's identities (especially relating to gender and ethnicity), experiences of education and aspirations for the future.

The Minority Ethnic Middle-classes and Education study was a small British Academy funded study conducted by the author with 36 middle-class, minority ethnic individuals from a range of 'visible' minority ethnic backgrounds. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents, pupils and young professionals, exploring their identity constructions and educational practices and experiences.

The analytic observations developed in this article are informed by a detailed reading across all the two data sets.

### **Frame**

The paper employs a feminist post-structuralist approach to theorizing social identities and inequalities that combines a concern with both structural inequalities and the individual performative aspect (Butler 1990) aspect of social identities. This approach is informed by post-colonial theorizations of identity and culture (e.g. Hall 1992). Data are analysed discursively (Burman & Parker 1992) in order to unpick the multiple ways in which minority ethnic pupils are Othered in relation to the dominant identity of the 'ideal pupil' as White, male, middle class, and so on.

### **Research findings**

Findings are discussed through the analytic device of a 'trichotomy' - a model that is proposed as a means for discursively mapping the relational production of the identity of the 'ideal', 'pathologised' and 'demonised' educational subject. It is argued that this can enable us to understand how the identity of the 'ideal pupil' is preserved as 'male' and/or 'White' in the face of evidence of 'actual' high achievement by girls, middle-class and/or particular minority ethnic pupils. This is because, despite their achievement, they are positioned as achieving it in the wrong way (e.g. via feminised 'plodding diligence' or through overly passive conformism within the classroom). Hence it is suggested that the trichotomy explains why the notion of 'over' achievement is only comprehensible as applied to female and/or minority ethnic Others - since 'achievement' is preserved as the rightful domain of the idealised, dominant subject position.

Examples are also provided of how educationally 'successful' minority ethnic young people and their families negotiate and navigate their ways through schooling and how they attempt to reconcile the tensions that they encounter. Attention is drawn to how, despite their 'success', minority ethnic young people are still required to work twice as hard, not only to succeed, but to prove they 'belong'.