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Ethnicity and class: GCSE performance

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Background

This paper documents the relative and changing performance of minority ethnic pupils in England and Wales at the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations from 2003 to 2007 and investigates the extent to which differentials in performance might be explained by social background.

Research Questions

The key questions investigated relate to the performance at GCSE of ethnic groups over the last few years, as compared to the white majority population. The paper uses data available from Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) in GCSE performance tables, 2005-07, but links are made to earlier data and changing patterns. The higher performance of girls has been a distinct feature for many years, though the gender gap narrowed slightly in 2006, compared to 2003: this area is explored with regards to the different ethnic groups.

Methods

The major review by Stevens (2007) covered the development of strands of research in ethnicity and educational inequality in English secondary schools over the last three decades to 2005. It classified research under five broad strands: political arithmetic (PA); racism and racial discrimination in school (RRDS); school effectiveness and school inclusion (SESI); culture and educational outcomes (CEO); educational markets and educational outcomes (EMEO). The RRDS and PA traditions have produced the most substantial and, at times, conflicting bodies of literature, and are covered in more detail below. Stevens critically examined the research traditions in terms of their research questions, methods, outcomes and related debates. He noted that a number of studies have failed to look at the differentials between different ethnic groups (instead looking at broader differences between the majority white population and ethnic minorities) and how notions of inequality are defined and constructed in educational settings. Stevens asserted that educational sociologists have neglected these important areas and described how sociologists of education could improve future research on racial and ethnic inequality in England. He also argued for a stronger integration of the different research traditions and mutual recognition of qualitative and quantitative research. This paper is in the PA tradition and uses DCSF data. The DCSF figures have the advantage of showing the results of an entire cohort. An additional advantage is that data is available every year. The most recent data for the Youth Cohort Survey had a gap of three years between cohorts.

Frame

The data from DCSF (2008, 2009) give the GCSE results of all pupils who have left school in a particular year since 1992. Information on ethnicity has only been available this century.

The minority ethnic population in Britain is growing; looking at more recent data gives us the opportunity to differentiate more carefully between different minority ethnic groups. Following the classification in DCSF data, we look at the following ethnic groups: white, African, Bangladeshi, Caribbean, Chinese, Indian and Pakistani.

Ethnicity: For DCSF the data on ethnicity comes from schools, who may ask parents to self-report, but the precise approach taken is discretionary.

Eligibility for free school meals: There is no data on social class for DCSF and so entitlement to free school meals (FSM), which is based on parental income, is used as a proxy.

In terms of inequality, the measure used is the attainment gap - the percentage point difference between the performance of a minority ethnic group from the equivalent white majority. Two key measures are used: a) the percentage of pupils obtaining 5 or more A*-C grades at GCSE, also called the GCSE benchmark, 5+ A*C b) the percentage of pupils obtaining 5 or more A*-C grades at GCSE EM including English and mathematics, also called Level 2, 5+A*C EM.

Research findings

The results show that Indian and Chinese pupils continue to significantly outperform white pupils at GCSE. Black African and black Caribbean pupils perform at a lower level. Pakistani and Bangladeshi boys also lag behind the white group. However, there is no significant gap in performance between Pakistani and Bangladeshi girls and their white counterparts. This is an important new finding, as it was not the case in earlier research. Taking account of social class explains some of the differentials but gaps in performance remain, particularly for black Caribbean pupils.

There is a small gender gap for Chinese, Indian and Bangladeshis; there is a similar gender gap for African and white pupils; the gap is highest for Caribbeans and Pakistanis. Moreover, the only group where the gender gap has widened is for Pakistanis.

The biggest change has occurred amongst Bangladeshi pupils: Bangladeshi girls now perform better than their white counterparts and the same may soon become true for Bangladeshi boys. However, Bangladeshi girls are still falling behind on the measure which includes English and mathematics: more detailed data would be required to find the subject which makes the most difference.

The gap for FSM white pupils using the GCSE measure for 5 or more A*-C EM is 32pp (percentage points). However, this gap between FSM and non-FSM pupils is markedly less ($p < 0.05$) for all minority ethnic groups. There are also some interesting differences with regards to differentials between boys and girls who are or are not entitled to FSM. The differential for white boys and girls is 30 and 33 pp respectively. As with white pupils, the differential for Pakistani and African girls is higher than for boys, partly as girls attain better than boys anyway. The marked anomaly is with Chinese girls who have a relatively low differential between those on FSM and those not on FSM. However, the number of Chinese pupils is fairly low so we should not make firm conclusions based on these results.

The results undermine claims that racism in schools and amongst teachers leads to poor attainment amongst minority ethnic groups. Quite simply, there are many minority ethnic groups who perform better at GCSE than the white population and, for those who perform less well, the evidence suggests that this is linked to social class much more than to ethnicity.

References

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