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'You got a pass so what more do you want?' Low expectations and institutional racism in the experiences of Black middle class parents

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Background

Previous research on the experiences of Black Caribbean students has highlighted their disproportionate representation in exclusions from school, low ranked teaching groups (streams, bands and sets) and in foundation tier GCSE examinations (where the highest grades are not available). These patterns have been repeated in both quantitative and qualitative research and by a range of different authors, from activist groups to government sponsored reports (e.g. Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Wanless, 2007). Such inequities are prima facie evidence of the continued existence of institutional racism in the English school system (Macpherson 1999; Rollock 2009). In recent years, however, policy priorities have shifted away from race equality and towards a focus on social class: 'institutional racism' has even been abandoned as a concept by the head of the Equalities and Human Rights Commission in favour of the more anodyne notion of 'systemic bias' (Phillips 2009). In this context there is an urgent need for a greater intersectional awareness of how race and class inequalities operate relationally in contemporary education. This paper adds to current debate by examining the experiences and perspectives of middle class Black Caribbean parents. Current policy discourse might assume that this group's class advantage would stand them in good stead but our empirical data point to a more complex picture of deep rooted and persistent race inequality.

Research Questions

This paper draws on initial findings from our two-year qualitative study examining the educational strategies of Black Caribbean middle class parents. In this project, we examine the interaction of social class and ethnicity as potential factors influencing how these parents experience the education system, navigate its demands and their aspirations for their children's education. Drawing on the findings of previous studies about White middle class parents, we explore the kinds of capitals on which Black middle class parents are able to draw to support their children and in particular to help identify ways in which parents seek to overcome racism.

Methods

We have carried out over 60 qualitative interviews with parents from Black Caribbean backgrounds identified, using Standard Occupational Classification codes, as being in professional or managerial employment. Parents have at least one child between 8 and 18 years, encompassing key transition points in the school calendar. Sensitive to debates about the role of Black men as fathers at least 10 of the interviews are with fathers.

Frame

We employ a broad range of conceptual tools, including the work of Bourdieu and Critical Race Theory to make sense of and analyse the data.

Research findings

The interviewees' experiences point to the continued salience of institutional racism as a central part of their interactions with education. Several interviewees recount their own experiences as children who faced persistently low teacher expectations, sometimes encountering explicit hostility from one or more teachers. Some point to the significance of an individual teacher who 'saw something in me' and

acted as a key source of support and guidance alongside the essential encouragement, belief and safety provided by their own families. Having generally been able to succeed despite their experiences of race inequity, the interviewees now approach education with a range of expectations as they negotiate the demands of their roles as parents and professionals. Like their White middle class peers documented in previous research our interviewees demonstrate high expectations for their children but our parents describe ongoing problems with low teacher expectations and a sense that good behaviour and average attainments by Black students are accepted as sufficient by too many teachers. Drawing on a range of cultural and economic capitals, the Black middle class parents in our sample adopt a variety of strategies in response (see Vincent & Rollock paper submitted for this Symposium), including close engagement with the school through acting as a governor, seeking additional educational support beyond the school, moving to a different school and/or utilizing private sector alternatives. As our data reveals, however, these strategies are by no means certain to provide an escape from institutional racism which takes numerous and often hidden forms.

References

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