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To cite this article: Derron Wallace & Remi Joseph-Salisbury (2021): How, still, is the Black Caribbean child made educationally subnormal in the English school system?, Ethnic and Racial Studies, DOI: [10.1080/01419870.2021.1981969](https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2021.1981969)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2021.1981969>



Published online: 04 Oct 2021.



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# How, still, is the Black Caribbean child made educationally subnormal in the English school system?

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## ABSTRACT

2021 marks the 50th anniversary of Bernard Coard's path-breaking book *How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Subnormal in the British School System* (1971a), a piece celebrated in filmmaker Steve McQueen's recent award-winning television series, *Small Axe* (2020). In considering the enduring relevance of *How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Subnormal*, this paper offers a critical analysis of the contemporary educational experiences and outcomes of Black Caribbean young people in English schools. We examine the historical and contemporary institutional factors that shape the persistent educational disadvantage Black Caribbean young people experience in England, particularly in secondary schools. We focus specifically on academic tracking, teacher diversity and expectations, and school discipline in order to demonstrate how Coard's findings remain prescient today and to highlight the urgent need to transform the structure and culture of English schools.

**ARTICLE HISTORY** Received 26 May 2021; Accepted 7 September 2021

**KEYWORDS** Structural racism; low expectations; school exclusion; teacher diversity; educational disadvantage; academic tracking

## Introduction

The release of British filmmaker Steve McQueen's critically acclaimed anthology series, *Small Axe* in November, 2020, brought wide-ranging international attention to the cultural, structural and political complexities of Black life in mid-to-late twentieth century Britain. In five discrete, delicately depicted episodes, *Small Axe* (2020) offers an aesthetic and narrative tribute to the Caribbean diaspora in Britain and pays homage to the broader African diaspora as a means through which the empire strikes back (CCCS 1982). The fifth installment in the series, "Education", tells a painfully haunting story of Kingsley Smith – a Black Caribbean boy disadvantaged socially and academically in

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

a London comprehensive school. Despite the efforts and increasing political consciousness of Kingsley's working-class immigrant family, Kingsley struggles to navigate a complex maze of racist institutional barriers that stymies his academic advancement and social-emotional development. Kingsley is disciplined by teachers for mischief that his white and Asian peers get away with, bullied by some of his peers in class due to the limits of his reading abilities, pushed out of the school in his catchment area, bussed to a school purportedly for children with extreme behavioural and psycho-social problems, and ultimately mislabelled as "educationally subnormal" by school officials – an official term used in British educational policy from the 1940s to the 1970s to refer disproportionately to immigrant and second-generation Black Caribbean children with learning and linguistic differences often misrepresented as deficits and at times misunderstood as special educational needs.<sup>1</sup> It is within this context of structural and cultural racism in British state education that Black Caribbean parents, pupils, youth workers and community organizers protested the institutional mechanisms by which too many Black Caribbean children like Kingsley experience British schools as sites of serial social suffering (Wallace 2018a).

Informed by McQueen's own experiences of education as "hell" (Okolosie 2020), *Small Axe's* cinematic exploration of state education for Black Caribbean people in Britain takes its cue from educational research that examined the ways in which Britain's racialised socio-political context contributed to the social construction of Black Caribbean and other minority ethnic pupils' educational disadvantage (Mirza 2009; Rampton 1981). Chief among these works is Bernard Coard's *How the West Indian Child Is Made Educationally Subnormal in the British School System* (1971a), a book that is described and discussed in McQueen's *Small Axe* (2020) as an impetus for Black parental organizing and resistance throughout Britain, and further explored in "Subnormal: A British Scandal" – a documentary following on from *Small Axe* (2020), which details "one of the biggest scandals in the history of education" (Shannon 2021: np). With *How the West Indian Child Is Made Educationally Subnormal*, Coard offered what is widely regarded as the first substantive empirical account to detail institutional racism impacting Black Caribbean children and young people in the British school system.

In this landmark text, youth worker, teacher and community activist Bernard Coard added analytical heft to claims advanced by grassroots alliances like the Caribbean Education and Community Workers' Association about the organizational arrangements that facilitate inequalities in British schools and society. It was during over a decade of state-arranged educational disadvantage and persistent discrimination experienced by Black Caribbean and ethnic minority pupils in British schools that Coard's (1971a) work emerged as a countercultural clarion call highlighting the "underachievement" of Black Caribbean youth, not as genetically designed but socially

constructed, not culturally inherent but politically conditioned. Coard (1971a) argued that Black Caribbean children were constructed as subnormal through British schools' misuse of culturally biased assessment tests, the misallocation of Black Caribbean and other immigrant minorities to educationally subnormal schools, and the misrepresentation of Caribbean cultures, communities and languages as not merely different, but deficient. The core problem, Coard (1971a) and others contended, should not be located in students' cognitive capacities – as the label “educationally subnormal” suggested – but in the racialised cultural politics surrounding students' ethno-racial and linguistic differences in British schools (Wallace 2019).

We contend that *How the West Indian Child Is Made Educationally Subnormal* is just as relevant today as when it was first published on May 6, 1971. This continued relevance is revealing of the intransigence of the institutional racism that stymies Black Caribbean schooling. 50 years after the publication of this canonical text in Black British studies and British educational research, Black Caribbean pupils in Britain are still regularly framed in discursive terms as an “underachieving group”. And although sociological and educational research has built upon Coard's work to further document the causes and consequences of Black Caribbean underachievement in the British school system, there has been insufficient improvement in the educational experiences and outcomes of Black Caribbean young people at the secondary and tertiary levels (Alexander and Shankley 2020; Bhopal 2018; Gillborn 2014). Black Caribbean pupils are awarded comparatively low grades on General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and A-level assessments, frequently overrepresented in special education programmes (Gillborn et al. 2016), disproportionately allocated to lower-ranked and less academically rigorous classes in schools (Strand 2012) and underrepresented at Russell group universities (Boliver 2016). As the 2021 publication of the report from the British government's Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities attests (Bhopal 2021), such indicators are usually proffered without due attention to the historical, political and institutional policy arrangements that influence these results (Mirza 2009). That was Coard's central argument in 1971 – one that remains relevant and significant in 2021.

This paper, therefore, re-engages Coard's *How the West Indian Child Is Made Educationally Subnormal* (1971a) in order to examine the historical and contemporary institutional factors that shape the persistent educational disadvantage Black Caribbean young people experience in Britain, particularly English secondary schools. Whilst Coard's seminal work focused on the “British School System” (though much of his data pertained primarily to England), we focus primarily on England to take note of the devolved nature of education, the potential differences between the countries that make up Great Britain, and because data is enumerated nationally. Thus, though the thrust of our arguments and analysis may hold for Britain (and

we talk of “Britain” where appropriate), our focus, data and analysis largely (though not exclusively) pertain specifically to England.

Despite rhetorical commitments to “multiculturalism”, “diversity”, and “race equality” in state education over the decades, we assert that the educational disadvantages experienced by Black Caribbean young people persist because the institutional mechanisms of structural and cultural inequalities in the 1970s endure as signature features of English schooling. This article first provides a broad overview of state education for Black Caribbean young people. We then examine three central mechanisms highlighted by Coard – “ability” grouping, teacher diversity, and school discipline – as we consider how these factors continue to shape the educational disadvantage Black Caribbean students experience contemporarily. Ultimately, we show that despite some surface level changes, the deep-rooted nature on structural racism means that too much remains the same for Black Caribbean students.

### **Black Caribbean pupils in English education**

According to the 2011 census, the Black Caribbean population in England and Wales amounts to 594,825, 1.1% of the total population (gov.uk 2019), and one third of the total Black population. In terms of the school population of England, 2020 Department for Education (DfE) data shows that the proportion of “minority ethnic” pupils in State-funded schools continues to rise, amounting to 33.9% of the primary school population, and 32.3% of the secondary school population (gov.uk 2020). Black ethnic groups make up 5.4% of State-funded primary school students, and 6.1% of State-funded secondary school students (gov.uk 2020). Black African students constitute the largest Black group, representing 3.7% of all State-funded primary school students, and 4.1% of all State-funded secondary school students. Black Other students constitute 0.8% of both the State primary and State secondary school population, and Black Caribbean students make up 0.9% of State-funded primary school students, and 1.2% of State-funded secondary school students. The Mixed White and Black Caribbean ethnic group (who may also identify, and be identified by others, as Black Caribbean) comprise 1.6% of State-funded primary schools, and 1.5% of State-funded secondary schools (gov.uk 2020). In comparison to Coard’s time of writing then, there is now a much larger and more diverse ethnic minority population, in both the general population, and in schools, and the Black Caribbean group constitutes a smaller proportion of this, and of those in Black ethnic groups (though the actual size of the Black Caribbean population has increased).

For over five decades, sociological and educational research has documented the causes and consequences of Black Caribbean “underachievement” in the British (usually English) school system. The most critical of these accounts deconstruct Black Caribbean “underachievement” as a distinctly problematic,

ahistorical formulation. Such research challenges the identification of Black Caribbean students' educational performance as principally a personal problem and a cultural dilemma, rather than a structural issue with historical roots (Gillborn and Mirza 2000; Tomlinson 1977; Troyna 1984). An assessment of this rich and expanding history of critical inquiry into the educational experiences of Black Caribbean youth (in Britain, particularly England, since the mid-1960s) reveals that, with the exception of some localized quantitative research (see for example: Mabey 1981, 1986), such scholarship has been largely qualitative in nature. Sociological and educational research in this tradition has focused primarily on the marginalization of Black Caribbean pupils in British primary and secondary schools, and its impact on the reproduction of racial, ethnic, class and gender educational inequalities (Coard 1971a; Troyna 1984).

These works examined the ways in which Britain's racialised socio-political context, institutional barriers, and educational policies contributed to the social construction of Black Caribbean pupils' as "underachievers", consistently marked by relatively low educational attainment (Little 1975; Mabey 1981, 1986). Tomlinson, for instance, suggests that "[f]rom 1960 to the early 1980s, there was a general consensus among researchers, practitioners, and minority parents that pupils from minority groups, particularly of Afro-Caribbean, Turkish-Cypriot, and Bangladeshi origin, 'underachieved' at school" (Tomlinson 1991, 124). This sense of "underachievement" generally meant that

when comparisons were made between majority and minority pupils on standardized group tests of ability and attainment (usually in reading and mathematics) and on individual IQ tests, and in school examinations, some ethnic minority pupils performed less well than their white peers. (Tomlinson 1991, 124)

However, as Strand (2012) and Gillborn (2008) contend, educational discourses on "underachievement" in Britain are principally shaped by attainment data, not the social and political conditions that inform how or to what extent students achieve.

Complicating and clarifying the social construction of Black Caribbean "underachievement", research over the past 30 years has explored the weight and impact of institutional racism (Gillborn 1997; Gosai 2009; Wright, Standen, and Patel 2010), parental and supplementary school engagement (Vincent et al. 2012; Weekes and Wright 1998), school exclusion as a state-sponsored disciplinary technique (Wright et al. 1998; Wright, Standen, and Patel 2010; Blair 2001; Christian 2005; Wallace 2018a), peer cultures of collaboration and competition (Wright et al. 1998; Youdell 2010), social class arrangements in neighbourhoods (Rollock et al. 2015; Gillborn and Mirza 2000; Mirza and Reay 2000; Mirza and Reay 1997; Vincent et al.

2012) and gender inequality in attainment discourses (Mirza 2009; Youdell 2003).

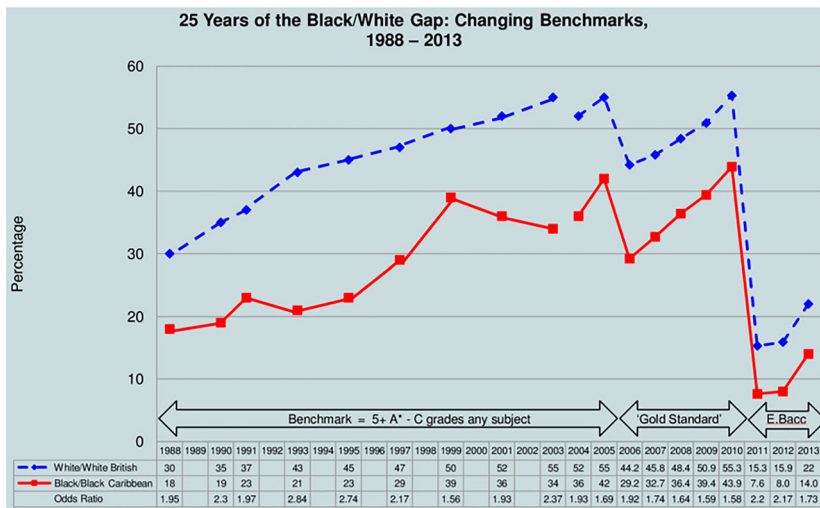
Whilst Black Caribbean “underachievement” has often been understood through “cultural deficit” explanations – that place the blame on Black Caribbean families, communities and culture – more recent research has pointed to a range of factors, shaped by racism, and spoken instead of an awarding gap.<sup>2</sup> Echoing many of Coard’s (1971a) findings, these factors include the impact of racial stereotypes; low expectations from teachers and wider society; setting, streaming and other “ability” grouping practices; limited racial literacy in the teaching profession; ethnocentric, exclusionary and alienating curricula; poor school leadership from headteachers; a lack of policy and institutional effort to address racial inequalities; (inadequate school responses to) interpersonal racism; and the wider impact of racism and poverty (Alexander and Shankley 2020; Alexander, Weekes-Bernard, and Arday 2015; Doharty 2019; Demie 2019; Gillborn 2008; Joseph-Salisbury 2020). In so doing, these works unravel the complex structural and institutional mechanisms that inform Black Caribbean pupils’ educational experiences and challenge public discourses on the comparatively low educational attainment of Caribbean pupils (Wallace 2017). The emphasis on history and social structure noted in these works is in keeping with Coard’s critiques in *How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Subnormal* (1971a).

Despite a longer history of work detailing the relatively “low attainment” of Black Caribbean students, it was only with the introduction of GCSE examinations (General Certificate of Secondary Education) in 1988 that more consistent – though still patchy – national data emerged as instruments for a more uniformed and “objective” analysis of educational attainment and its implications for teaching and learning.<sup>3</sup> For this reason, and notwithstanding the research referred to above, our discussion in this section (particularly as it pertains to quantitative data) is largely confined to the period after the introduction of GCSEs. Even since this point, developing a comprehensive and consistent picture of attainment data over time is not an easy task (Gillborn and Mirza 2000; Gillborn et al. 2016). Firstly, prior to 2004, official government data on Black students’ achievement was seldom disaggregated by ethnicity. This meant that, subsumed by the larger Black category, the specific national data on Black Caribbean students’ attainment was not always clearly identifiable.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, and perhaps more significantly, attainment data have been complicated at particular junctures by changes in the key educational benchmark. In 2006 Tony Blair’s New Labour government introduced a “Gold Standard” measure which shifted the “success” benchmark from 5 A\* – C passes, to the more specific 5 A\* – C passes including English and Mathematics. In 2011, the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) – created by Michael Gove – was introduced by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition government, “initially requiring higher pass grades in

English, mathematics, two sciences, a modern or ancient foreign language and either history or geography". There were additional GCSE reforms in 2015 which, amongst more substantive policy shifts, changed the grading system from letters to numbers (Burgess and Thomson 2019). And in 2016, "Progress 8" and "Attainment 8" measures were introduced (though some schools opted in early in 2015), measuring pupils across "8 qualifications including mathematics (double weighted) and English (double weighted), 3 further qualifications that count in the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) measure and 3 further qualifications that can be GCSE qualifications (including EBacc subjects) or any other non-GCSE qualifications on the DfE approved list" (DfE 2016, 2).

Whilst the picture is a messy one, with the government now publishing GCSE attainment data in a range of ways, including both the "Gold Standard" and Progress/Attainment 8, the bottom line remains clear: in relation to whatever the contemporaneous benchmark, Black Caribbean attainment/awarding is persistently and stubbornly below the all-pupil and white pupil average (Gillborn and Mirza 2000; Gillborn et al. 2016; Wright 2013). Taken from Gillborn et al.'s (2017) research, Figure 1 below takes account of the various benchmark changes and depicts the "attainment gap" between Black Caribbean students (Black students more generally until 2004) and White British students in England between 1988 and 2013. This figure highlights the persistence of the educational attainment gap over a period of 25 years.

Since 2013, that is, after the period covered in this figure, the attainment gap has continued. For instance, the most recent data for England (from the



**Figure 1.** Black/White educational attainment gap in England (Gillborn et al. 2016).



2019 to 2020 academic year) shows that, in terms of “Attainment 8”, the average Black Caribbean attainment (vis-a-vis the benchmark) is 5.7 points lower than the White British average, and 6.2 points below the all pupil average (gov.uk 2021a).<sup>5</sup> In terms of GCSEs in English and Mathematics at grade 5 or above (equivalent to a high C and low B in the previous grading system), in the 2019–2020 academic year, 34.8% of Black Caribbean students attained the grades, in comparison to 49.9% of all pupils, and 49.2% of White British students (gov.uk 2021b) – that is, a respective gap of 15.1% (to all pupils) and 14.4% (to White British students).

With regard to GCSE awarding, it is also worth noting that the picture is complicated by the intersection of gender (Alexander and Shankley 2020). For example,<sup>6</sup> looking again at England in the 2019–2020 academic year, 40.4% of Black Caribbean girls attained the English and Mathematics grade 5 (or above), 9.5% below the all-pupil average, and 13.7% below the all-girl average. The rate for Black Caribbean boys was 29.2%, 16.7% below the all-boy average, and 20.7% below the all-pupil average (gov.uk 2021a). Thus, whilst the awarding disparities exist across gender, they’re particularly acute for Black Caribbean boys.

Whilst one might be tempted to read the endurance of racialized awarding disparities as a simple reflection on the intransigence of educational disadvantage, if not the “cultural deficit” of Black Caribbean students, research with a more critical orientation, in the tradition of Coard’s *How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Subnormal* (1971a), paints a more troubling picture. Benchmark changes not only obfuscate enduring racial and ethnic inequalities in education, but they produce a significant decrease in the number of young people reaching targets.<sup>7</sup> As Figure 1 and related analyses from Gillborn et al. (2016) show, these changes actively disadvantage some ethnic minority groups, including Black Caribbean students. Moreover, and as depicted in Figure 1, benchmark changes often come at times when attainment gaps are narrowing (Gillborn et al. 2016). This “goalpost moving” therefore acts to “protect the racial status quo” (Gillborn 2014, 28), and reset the educational disadvantage of Black Caribbean students (among others), particularly in periods when they appear to be “catching up” and closing the attainment gap. This is, as Gillborn (2014, 26) puts it, “racism as policy” (also see: Gillborn et al. 2016): policy serving to “manage race inequality at sustainable levels while maintaining, and even enhancing, white dominance of the system” (Gillborn 2014, 37). As we go on to discuss, although useful in terms of providing a broad-brush indication of the schooling of Black Caribbean pupils, and particularly the enduring nature of educational inequalities, levels of attainment only reveal part of the picture.

Ongoing talks of Black Caribbean “underachievement” in English public and educational policy discourses focus on Black Caribbean pupils’ low educational attainment, often as a foregone conclusion. Far less concerted

attention is given to the significant institutional mechanisms that remain entrenched in the English school system that facilitate the low educational attainment and poor educational experiences of Black Caribbean pupils (Wallace 2018b). In the remaining sections of this paper, we examine three institutional factors Coard raised in 1971 that remain pressing to date: “ability” grouping, teacher diversity and school discipline.

### **“Ability” grouping between and within schools**

When Bernard Coard decried the educational disadvantage of Black Caribbean pupils in British schools, he did more than call attention to the biases and beliefs of education policymakers and practitioners. It is often forgotten that he leveled a critique of between-school “ability” grouping’s disproportionate impact on Black Caribbean pupils in schools. “Ability” grouping reinforced hierarchies of value among students by “separating out ‘the clever and stupid, the educable and ineducable’” (Race Today 1975, 184). When Coard wrote *How the West Indian Child Is Made Educationally Subnormal* (1971a), Black Caribbean pupils were disproportionately the ones for whom between-school “ability” grouping proved a punitive and near-perfunctory measure. Drawing on data from the Inner London Educational Authority (ILEA) in the late 1960s and early 70s, Coard (1971a, 28) writes:

The situation is particularly bad for West Indians because three quarters of all the immigrant children in these Educationally Subnormal schools are West Indian, *whereas West Indians are only half of the immigrant population in the ordinary schools*. The 1970 figures are even more alarming, for even though immigrants comprise nearly 17 percent of the normal school population, nearly 34 percent of the ESN school population is immigrant. And four out of every five immigrant children in these ESN schools are West Indian!

With these results, Coard underscored between-school “ability” grouping as a highly consequential arrangement – one with acutely negative effects on the educational experiences of Black Caribbean pupils. Close readings of the history of Black education in Britain suggest that Black Caribbean pupils were not only disproportionately misplaced into Educationally Subnormal (ESN) schools (Sivanandan 2008), but they were also frequently bussed across London boroughs to ESN schools in which “children are prepared for *survival*, not excelling, or even participating actively in society as does the average person” (Coard 1971a, 31).

Offering complementary and more expansive anti-racist perspectives on the purpose of educationally subnormal (ESN) schools, Tomlinson (1978) and Troyna (1984), among others, highlighted how ESN schools prepared Black Caribbean youth and other immigrant minorities for specific manual and service functions in the British labour market. Furthermore, subsequent educational research and community reports described ESN schools as

“educational dustbins” in a segregated school system, the very existence of which was challenged so that equitable and inclusive education could more meaningfully take root in the British school system (Mac an Ghaill 1988; Gerrard 2013). Spurred by the protest efforts of the Black Parents’ Movement and the organizing power of the Black Supplementary Schools Movement throughout the 1970s, educational policymakers and government officials came to question ESN schools as suitable arrangements for Black Caribbean and minority ethnic pupils in British schools (Mirza and Reay 2000). *The Swann Report* (1985) and its antecedent, *The Rampton Report* (1981) challenged the disproportionate designation of Black Caribbean pupils to ESN schools and noted the discriminatory dynamics that persisted in British schools and society. However, these reports devoted scant attention to the within-school “tracking processes that left Black Caribbean young people over-represented in lower ranked sets and sustained racialised and ethno-cultural hierarchies among students in ‘normal’ schools” (Tomlinson 1981, 56).

Contemporarily, the most direct continuation of Coard’s (1971a) concerns over between-school “ability” grouping manifests in “special educational needs” identification, and special school designation. As Skiba et al. (2008) have noted, over-representation in Special Schools, or disproportionate identification of SEN (Special Educational Needs), represents one of the “most long-standing and intransigent issues in the field” (Skiba et al. 2008, 264). As was the case in 1971, identifying and labelling students as SEN is not based exclusively on their “objective” academic achievement, but also predicated subjectively on their “emotional and behavioral difficulties”, – the official descriptor currently used in the British school system. And even in “regular” state comprehensive schools, Black Caribbean children are disproportionately labelled as having emotional and behavioural difficulties – and all too frequently labelled by teachers as EBD as a descriptive shorthand. In some cases, SEN and EBD have emerged as new acronyms for representing Black Caribbean students as “educationally subnormal”, as was done in Coard’s time, rendering such students as hard to reach affectively and hard to teach academically.

According to the most recent data for England, Black Caribbean pupils are also overrepresented in both State-funded special schools and non-maintained special schools where they make up 1.3% and 1.2% of the population, respectively (vs 1.0% of the total pupil population) (gov.uk 2020). Mixed White and Black Caribbean pupils (who, as mentioned earlier, are often racialized as Black) make up 1.9% of the State-funded special school population vs 1.5% of the total pupil population (gov.uk 2020). As Strand and Lindorff (2018, 5–6) argue, with echoes of Coard, whilst SEN identification can be beneficial in some cases, there are also possible negative outcomes, that “include an inappropriate or narrowed curriculum, restriction of opportunities because of lowered expectations, or feelings of stigmatisation/labelling on the part

of identified pupils. There is a danger that ethnic disproportionality, if not addressed, may through inadequate or inappropriate provision perpetuate the same unequal outcomes in the future”.

In addition to this most direct continuation of the ESN placement Coard highlighted, there are also other ways in which Black Caribbean, and other racially minoritised students, are streamed. White supremacy changes shape and form in order to endure. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the ways in which the school system disadvantages Black Caribbean students continues to evolve. Whilst we come to discuss school disciplinary procedures later, school exclusions often lead to students being assigned to Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) and Alternative Provision – as sites for students with high levels of “emotional and behavioral difficulties”. As Perera (2020, 6) argues, pointing to the intersection of race and gender again, “it is young boys of black Caribbean heritage that are significantly overrepresented” in Pupil Referral Units and Alternative Provision. Whilst Black Caribbean pupils make up 1.0% of the total pupil population in England, they make up 3.0% of those in Pupil Referral Units. There are disparities too, for the Mixed White and Black Caribbean population who comprise 1.5% of the total pupil population, but 3.8% of the Pupil referral unit population (gov.uk 2020). Repeating a term Coard used to refer to ESN schools (Coard 2005), PRUs have been described (on more than one occasion) as “dumping grounds” (BBC News 2014; George 2018), with low standards and low expectations, and devastatingly low attainment levels (Perera 2020). Pupil Referral Units are therefore a contemporary iteration of the unequal educational landscape that Coard described. Of particular concern here, is what parents and campaigners have referred to as the *PRU-to-prison pipeline*, describing “the nexus between schools and prison”, of which PRUs are a central component (Perera 2020, 16). Where Coard (1971a, 31) described ESN schools as preparing children “for survival, not for excelling, or even participating actively in society”, the PRU-to-prison pipeline points to pupils being prepared for incarceration and a permanently liminal status in the British polity.

As Perera (2020) warns, there are considerable efforts being made to expand, and increase the privatization and academization of the alternative provision (or PRU) sector. Further privatization creates further vested economic interests in the maintenance and expansion of PRUs. Those vested interests translate into a desire to consign and retain students in these provisions. Given the over-representation of Black Caribbean students in school exclusions (which we discuss later), in PRUs, and in the prison estate that PRUs feed, it is not difficult to conclude that Black Caribbean communities will be affected particularly harshly (Perera 2020) – especially when we consider how these economic interests are entangled with the (racialised) prison-industrial-complex.<sup>8</sup> These are the twenty-first century implications of a decades-long problem of separated schooling by “ability” but, in some

cases, segregated schooling by ethnicity, race and class that now informs the marginalization of Black Caribbean students to bottom sets in schools, the removal of these students to PRUs, and their ultimate relegation to prisons, all of which are sites of confinement with which Black Caribbean people regularly contend.

### **Teacher diversity to counter low teacher expectations**

The racial diversity of the teaching force, or “the need for more black teachers” (Coard 2005, np) as well as examiners and educational psychologists, was an issue highlighted by Coard in his report, and an issue that continues to haunt education (Vieler-Porter 2020). The most recent Department for Education (DFE) data reports that, in the 2019/2020 academic year, 91% of teachers in England’s state-funded schools were white (gov.uk 2021c), whereas just 2.3% were Black (and only 1.1% are Black Caribbean). This is in contrast to the student demographics for England, where Black students comprise 5.4% of State-funded primary school students, and 6.1% of State-funded secondary school students (gov.uk 2020). Whilst there is one white teacher for every 13 white students, there are 42 Black students to every 1 Black student (Hillman 2021). This ratio, reflecting the underrepresentation of Black staff, is even starker in some geographical areas. For example, there are 192 Black students for every 1 Black teacher in the North East of England, and 134 Black students for every 1 Black teacher in the North West of England (Hillman 2021). As the Runnymede Trust and NASUWT observe then (2017, 9), there is “a chronic shortage of BME teachers in relation to the BME pupil population”. The underrepresentation of Black staff is worse still in more senior roles (NASUWT and Runnymede 2017). Only 1.6% of deputies and assistants are Black, and just 1% of headteachers are (gov.uk 2021c). These disparities manifest, too, among school governors and trustees (DFE and Race Disparity Unit 2018). Recent work by Vieler-Porter (2020) has detailed not only the lack of change in (under-)representation, but also the profound obstacles faced by “Black and Minority Ethnic” leaders in education, particularly pertaining to racialized surveillance and everyday racisms.

Limited ethno-racial diversity in the teaching workforce has been repeatedly highlighted as a core equity and racial justice challenge. An increase in teacher diversity across geographical and subject areas is now frequently offered as a potential solution. But such pronouncements are not at all new. Coard began advocating for such sweeping changes in the teacher workforce in 1971. He considered teacher diversity as a key mechanism for challenging low expectations of Black Caribbean students, raising the achievement of all students, and preparing all students to successfully participate in Britain’s increasingly diverse society. In 2018, the *Department for Education* and the *Race Disparity Unit* released a “Statement of intent on the

diversity of the teaching workforce” (DfE and Race Disparity Unit 2018, 1). The statement notes that “the value of a diverse workforce and school leadership is clear”, citing pupil development, “social cohesion”, and the need to create an environment with “visible, diverse role models” (DfE and Race Disparity Unit 2018, 2). A recent study with secondary school teachers in Greater Manchester noted that teachers believe teacher diversity to be one of the key issues in contemporary education, with the whiteness of the teaching force constituting a barrier to the attainment and wellbeing of “Black and minority ethnic” students (Joseph-Salisbury 2020). The teachers in the study argued that there was a great need for role models to be present for young people, and for young people to be able to see themselves represented amongst the teaching force and in other positions of authority/professionalism (Joseph-Salisbury 2020). It is possible that gender (intersecting with race) is an important factor with regard to role models too (Alexander and Shankley 2020; Gillborn and Mirza 2000), and therefore worth noting that less than a quarter of (the already underrepresented) Black Caribbean teachers are men (gov.uk 2021c).

These issues are reminiscent of those highlighted by Coard (1971a, 52), particularly his emphasis on “the importance of providing our Black children with adults to identify with and feel proud of”. As he explained, such an endeavour is in no small part, about the repair of “the self-image of the Black child in the British school system” (Coard 1971b, 51). As he argued, self-image and wellbeing are intertwined with capacity to learn. The affective and the academic are often powerfully linked. Thus, not only are these issues important in their own right, but they also have an impactful on academic attainment. In this regard, as much as Coard was concerned with the need for more Black teachers, counsellors and other educational professionals, he appeared more concerned with the racial stereotypes, and the low expectations that teachers often have for Black students. These issues, too, endure long after Coard’s interventions. As Gillborn (2014, 34) observes, “teachers’ expectations of black students and their white working class peers tend to be systematically lower than warranted by their performance in class”.

Low teacher expectations can impact Black Caribbean girls’ and boys’ wellbeing and self-esteem, and have long since been noted to fuel self-fulfilling prophecies that feed the relatively low attainment of Black Caribbean students. More recent research has problematized assumptions about the inevitability of self-fulfilling prophecies, instead showing how students sometimes use low teacher expectations as a source of motivation (Joseph-Salisbury 2019). Nevertheless, the potential negative effects continue to be a barrier worthy of attention (Johnston, Wildy, and Shand 2019). Low teacher expectations can also have implications for “ability” grouping (within and between schools), a concern of Coard’s discussed above, which can impact how much of the curriculum is covered, the quality and rigour with which

it is covered, the level of exams students are entered into, and therefore the grades that can be attained (Gillborn 2014; Strand 2012).

As well as highlighting and exacerbating a range of broader racial inequalities, the coronavirus pandemic has placed a particular light on the impact of low teacher expectations. The closure of schools and cancellation of GCSE and A-Level examinations led to the provision of alternative arrangements for the 2020 and 2021 academic years. An exam regulator algorithm (which drew upon teacher input) was initially used, but was scrapped after student protests and criticisms of its inherent biases. In its place, grades were awarded through the originally proposed alternative of teacher assessments. However, as an open letter from the Runnymede Trust to the Education Secretary noted, “students from lower socio-economic backgrounds”, a significant proportion of whom are “BME”, are likely to face “under-predictions in grades” (Haque 2020, np). Even amidst the coronavirus pandemic, teacher expectations remain highly consequential for students’ educational trajectories and life chances.

Whilst increased racial diversity in the teaching force is an important and necessary intervention, it is also important to note the limits of such representational interventions (Maylor 2009, 2014; Wallace 2020). Any demographic changes would need to be supported by efforts to increase the racial literacy of all teachers, through training and continued professional development, as well as culture shift in what is expected of teachers. Such intervention would guard against the flawed assumption that (all) teachers of colour already hold the necessary racial literacy, or capacity to engage students of colour (Maylor 2009), whilst also ensuring that white teachers are equipped to raise their expectations of students, and that the burden for anti-racist teaching does not fall solely on teachers of colour.

In this section, we have shown how issues that Coard highlighted in 1971 regarding a lack of diversity amongst teachers, and low teacher expectations, continue to shape contemporary education, and specifically the experiences of Black Caribbean students. In addition to the issues set out above, low teacher expectations are also significant in terms of school disciplinary procedures, an issue we look at in the next section.

### **School disciplinary procedures**

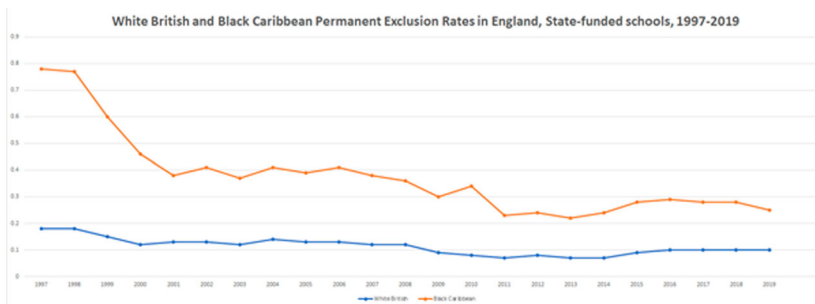
School discipline has been a principal mechanism through which institutional racism is articulated in schools, with Black Caribbean students, particularly boys, significantly and persistently targeted as in need of disciplinary intervention (Gillborn et al. 2016). Based on analysis of data on national permanent exclusions in England from 2006 to 2015, Demie (2021, 55) notes, “Black Caribbean pupils were nearly four times more likely to receive a permanent exclusion than the school population as a whole and were twice as likely

to receive a fixed period exclusion". Illustrating the intransigence of such racial and ethnic disparities, [Figure 2](#) below highlights permanent exclusion rates for White British and Black Caribbean students in England from 1997 (the first year when such national data became available) to 2019 (the most recent available data).

As [Figure 2](#) indicates, there was a significant reduction in the overall number of permanent exclusions (Gillborn et al. 2016). This was not mere happenstance, but the result of strategic governmental effort between 1998 and 2001, which brought about a decline in the rate of disproportionality between the two groups. Nevertheless, Black Caribbean rates of permanent exclusion have remained notably higher, with Black Caribbean students always being excluded at more than twice the rate of White British students, and the gap appearing to have steadied – or locked in – since 2011.

The most recent data (2018/19) show that Black Caribbean students and Mixed White/Black Caribbean students have the third and fourth highest rate of permanent exclusions, respectively (behind the Irish Traveller and Gypsy/Roma groups) (gov.uk 2021d). Black Caribbean students are permanently excluded at 2.5 times the rate of White students. In terms of Fixed Term or temporary exclusions, similar patterns are evident: Black Caribbean students have the fourth highest, and Mixed White/Black Caribbean students the third highest rates (behind Gypsy/Roma and Irish Traveller students), with Black Caribbean students just under twice as likely to be excluded than White students (gov.uk 2021e). Giving a glimpse of how exclusions are shaped by intersectional factors, Alexander and Shankley (2020, 111) note that "the most recent data indicate that Black Caribbean boys with SEND are 168 times more likely to be excluded than White girls who are non-SEND". These statistics are intimately tied to streaming or behavioural "ability grouping" into PRUs and Alternative Provision that we discussed earlier.

As we have shown, Coard's work took as its primary concerns low teacher expectations and the educational streaming of Black students (into ESNs). We might think of school disciplinary procedures as a key



**Figure 2.** White British and Black Caribbean school exclusion rates.



way in which low expectations are operationalized, and a key (and particularly severe) way in which students are streamed, in this case out of the schools (often into, Pupil Referral Units or “educational dustbins”). School exclusions have also been shaped by the pandemic context. A report from the campaign group *No More Exclusions* (NME) highlighting how exclusions have been used “to address or at least manage” additional pressures placed upon schools by pandemic (NME 2021, 2), and how “children from marginalised backgrounds” continued to be disproportionately excluded (NME 2021, 5).

In addition to the official data on exclusions, the contemporary picture is also complicated by the issue of “off-rolling”. That is, “the practice of removing a pupil from the school roll without using a permanent exclusion, when the removal is primarily in the best interests of the school, rather than the best interests of the pupil” (Owen 2019, np). This often constitutes an attempt, on the part of schools, “to improve grade averages by removing pupils unlikely to achieve well in their exams” (Stokes 2018, no pagination). As the IPPR (2017, 7) has suggested, such informal methods obscure the scale of the problem with “tens of thousands” of students “leaving school rolls in what appear to be illegal exclusions”. Markedly, as Stokes (2018, no pagination) has argued, “BAME [Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic] young people experience informal exclusion disproportionately but the issue remains largely unaddressed”. As such, the broad patterns of racialised exclusions remain locked in place from Coard’s time of writing, and “off-rolling”, alongside aforementioned PRUs, constitutes another contemporary manifestation of the “ability” grouping issues Coard highlighted.

This evidence is unsurprising when we recognize that, as David Gillborn (1990) has noted, Black students, and particularly Black Caribbean students, have often been seen to pose a threat to the authority of teachers, stereotyped as loud, aggressive, unruly and troublesome. As such, with regard to Black Caribbean students, teachers have often been concerned more with behaviour and discipline, than academic attainment. In fact, although the ESN schools that Coard wrote of were purportedly for students who could not “cope with the average academic requirements of a normal school” (Coard 1971a, 29), the reality was that many students were referred because they were perceived to be “a bloody nuisance” (Coard 1971a, 54). A recent study by Feysia Demie (2021) highlighted several institutional factors that shape the high exclusion rates of Black Caribbean students, including institutional racism in schooling, a lack of training for staff in issues pertaining to race, and inadequate definitions of racism within schools. Underlining the interconnections between the issues discussed in this article, and raised by Coard, Demie (2021) also highlighted low teacher expectations (also see Parsons 2018) and a lack of diversity amongst the school workforce.

Displays of Black Caribbean culture, and particularly Rastafari culture, have often set Black Caribbean students on a collision course with their schools (Gillborn 1990; also see: Crozier 2005). Historically, linguistic differences, or the use of patois or Creole has been central to this. Just two years before the publication of Coard's report, Creole was described by The National Association of School Masters as "plantation English which is socially unacceptable and inadequate for communication". A year later, in 1970, it was described by the Birmingham branch of the Association of Teachers to Pupils from Overseas (1970) as "babyish", "careless", "slovenly", and "lacking proper grammar". In Coard's report, he remarked on how cultural bias pertaining to language created "tremendous difficulties" for Black Caribbean students (Coard 1971a, 34), who were "being told their language is second-rate". Whilst Paul Warmington has remarked on how Creole and Patois were not seen, within education, as legitimate first languages (in Shannon 2021).

Whilst demographic shifts now mean that most Black Caribbean students are British born, and are therefore more likely to speak what Coard (1971a, 34) referred to as "standard classroom English", there is still evidence to suggest that speech codes and vernacular associated with Black youth are seen as oppositional to, and disruptive of, academic orientations (Warikoo 2011). Sociologist Natasha Warikoo (2011) has described the "balancing acts" that Black youth, in both the UK and the US, engage in as they navigate both their peer cultures and academic cultures which valorize whiteness and penalize Black cultural expression on the other. Whilst the issue of language is perhaps less prevalent than at the time of Coard's (1971a) intervention, there is still evidence that, to a lesser extent, it endures fifty years later.

Whilst issues around language are perhaps not as pertinent today, this is not to say that discrimination against Black cultural expression – often operationalized through disciplinary procedures – has subsided. Rather, as is so often the case with white supremacy, its modes of articulation are constantly reformulating. As *No More Exclusions (NME)* warned in 2020, "schools are unfairly punishing black students for their hairstyles, wearing bandanas and kissing teeth" (Busby 2020, np). With clear echoes of Coard's report (particularly Chapter 2), Zahra Bei, the founder of NME notes that Black students are being more harshly disciplined due to "a lack of understanding about cultural traits" (Busby 2020, np).

As suggested by NME, a key contemporary disciplinary issue pertains to school uniform policies, which often discriminate against the natural hair, and hairstyling of, Black students. This lease and related expressions of cultural bias and institutional racism led hundreds of students at Pimlico Academy in South West London to protest what they described as the school's "racist dress code", prohibiting afros for "blocking the view" of other students. They did so on March 31, 2021, which coincidentally was

the very day Coard hosted a virtual launch for the second edition of *How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Subnormal* with hundreds of people in attendance. The student walk-out at Pimlico Academy is one of the more recent inflection points in a longer history of student demonstrations to racial discrimination and cultural marginalization in British schools. Scholars and activists have addressed this in recent years. For example, Emma Dabiri has noted that:

The UK school system has a problem with afro-textured hair. Across the country black and mixed-black pupils are being excluded because their hair is too short, too long, too big or too full. Pupils have been excluded for fades, locs, braids, natural afros and more – in effect every single style and necessary protective method for the maintenance and upkeep of afro hair has been penalised, often in the harshest possible ways. (2020, np; also see Graham 2016, 132)

A 2019 “Hair Equality Report”, highlighted these issues, pointing out that 1 in 4 adults, and 1 in 6 children (of the parents surveyed) reported “bad or very bad experience at school with their Afro-textured hair and identity”. A significant proportion of these, particularly for the young people, pertained to school policies that “penalised Afro hair” (De Leon and Chikwendu 2019, 5). Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly (2018) have argued that such uniform policies hide behind a facade of neutrality, and constitute a form of anti-black social control in English schools that reinscribes conditions of white supremacy. To understand the significance of these policies, it is necessary to recognize the racially and culturally symbolic nature of hair. Hair is not neutral, but imbued with racial and cultural meaning (Mercer 1994). It is the “most visible stigmata of blackness, second only to skin” (Mercer 1994, 1). From this vantage point, we can see how school uniform policies that discriminate against Black hair are another iteration of the cultural biases that Coard highlighted, and can be a particularly severe forms of educational streaming (through school exclusions).

Amidst high-profile stories of Black students being excluded for their natural hair, it is no surprise that resistance to such policies is growing. In 2018, legal action led Fulham Boys School to accept that its “ban on dreadlocks resulted in indirect discrimination” (Davies 2018, np). Emma Dabiri is campaigning to amend the Equality Act to explicitly protect Afro hair (Dabiri 2020), and a group of young Black organizers – the Halo Collective – are working to “end hair inequality for good” (Halo Collective, nd: np). Their work has included the development of a charter for schools and workplaces to sign up to (BBC 2020). In the contemporary moment, then, school uniform policies, as they discriminate against Black hair, seem to be a key issue facing Black students in British schools. Just as Coard showed through his focus on supplementary education, and enacted through his report, Black resistance to educational injustice is omnipresent.

One particularly salient issue in the current moment, which relates to school discipline and streaming, pertains to the growing presence of police in schools, or school-based police officers (Joseph-Salisbury 2021). Whilst the history of police working with schools dates back at least to the 1950s, and the specific role of school-based police officers to 2002, the years in the run up to the 50th anniversary of Coard's report have been marked by a flurry of high-profile calls to place more police officers in schools. Given the vast body of evidence detailing how Black students are subject to racialised over-policing in wider society, as well as disproportionate levels of surveillance and social control within schools, it is perhaps not surprising that Jasbinder Nijjar (2020, 1) has characterized "police-school partnerships" as part of "the war on black youth". Not only does evidence suggest that school-based police officers are more likely to be in schools with more working class and racially minoritised students, but even within schools Black students are disproportionately targeted by officers (Connelly, Legane, and Joseph-Salisbury 2020; Joseph-Salisbury 2021).

A key issue here is that of the *school-to-prison pipeline* which, linking back to Coard and our earlier discussion of "ability" grouping, might be thought of as the most threatening form of educational streaming (and particularly PRUs), that is streaming directly into an increasingly privatized prison estate, in which Black people are already significantly over-represented. And while Coard did not address dress code policies, policing in schools, and pupil referral units specifically in *How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Subnormal* (1971a), these school disciplinary procedures are but contemporary expressions of the "cultural bias", "prejudice and patronisation", "anxiety and hostility" Coard predicted would endure if substantive structural changes were not made to the British school system.

### **How, still, is the Black Caribbean child made educationally subnormal?**

*How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Subnormal* remains a powerful and prescient text fifty years later. However, in this current conjuncture shaped by economic austerity, public anti-racist protests, simultaneous racial retrenchment, and a global public health crisis in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic, the continued relevance of Coard's work inspires a new question: how, still, is the Black Caribbean child made educationally subnormal in school and society? It is a simple question that defies a simple or singular solution. It is indeed true that policymakers no longer describe Black Caribbean children and young people as "educationally subnormal", as was the case in the mid-twentieth century.

Nevertheless, Black Caribbean pupils are regularly framed as such, as politicians continue to offer one-sided, deficit depictions of Black Caribbean pupils in public discourse regarding their “underachievement” (Alexander and Shankley 2020), with comparatively little attention to the institutional practices that inform the awarding of student grades, and student experiences (Wallace 2018b; Wallace 2020). And although a raft of public policy reports has noted the longstanding discriminatory dynamics that shape the social and scholastic experiences of Black Caribbean pupils in schools, the principal challenge of providing equitable opportunities for Black Caribbean pupils remains largely under-addressed in schooling. In other words, the labels for describing Black Caribbean pupils in the field of education have changed, but in some respects, the structural conditions and institutional practices continue without the necessary critical eye to effectively address them.

This article was written to mark fifty years on from the publication of Bernard Coard’s *How the West Indian Child is made Educationally Subnormal in the British Education System*. In addition to outlining the importance of Coard’s initial interventions, we have considered the contemporary educational context for Black Caribbean students in England. We have focused on three specific areas highlighted in Coard’s initial report – ability grouping, teacher diversity, and school disciplinary procedures – in order to illustrate the extent to which, half a century later, Coard’s lessons continue to be prescient. Within each, we have shown the continuities whilst also highlighting how barriers reshape and take on new forms. As Coard contends, racial inequalities remain entrenched in British schools and society despite changes to the cast of teachers and leaders and the initiation of specific programmes since the 1970s because racism is systemic – a multi-generational, multi-institutional project of discrimination, deferral and denial whose legacies are preserved through organizational arrangements such as “ability” grouping, limited teacher diversity, and school discipline. As this paper has demonstrated, there is no shortage of critical scholarship pointing to policy interventions to transform the schooling of Black Caribbean students. What is missing is not the evidence base, or solutions, but the political will to pursue and sustain equitable education.

What Coard (1971a) called for 50 years ago was not merely the acknowledgement of Black Caribbean young people’s educational disadvantage in British state schools. He also called for the cultural, political and structural transformation of British educational institutions, including “ability” grouping practices like streaming, that reproduce unjust and inequitable social relations for Black Caribbean youth, including ones like Kingsley in McQueen’s *Small Axe* (2020). It is still not too late to heed his clarion call for the sake of all British pupils – especially historically disadvantaged groups like Black Caribbean young people.

## Notes

1. The term “educationally subnormal” (ESN) was used in the 1944 Education Act to categorise “children with low achievement in school work” (Williams 1965, 136). It was one of 11 categories of “handicap” defined under the 1945 “The Handicapped Pupils and School Health Service Regulations”. The 1970 Education (Handicapped Children) Act further embedded the identification of pupils as “Educationally Subnormal”, including adding a distinction between severely educationally subnormal (ESN(S)) and moderately educationally subnormal (ESN(M)) (Parsons 2012). In 1978, the Warnock report introduced the idea of “special educational needs” marking a shift away from ESN as an official category.
2. We use “awarding gap” here to denote a shift away from “attainment gap”, and a placing of the focus on the responsibilities and failures of the education system to serve Black Caribbean students.
3. Generally sat by students at age 15 or 16, GCSE examinations are deemed to be of particular importance because they act as a “gatekeeper” to post-16 education routes and success in the job market (Burgess and Thomson 2019, 4). Contemporarily, then, it is through GCSE attainment – generally in relation to the all-pupil or white pupil average (referred to variously as an achievement gap, attainment gap, or perhaps more usefully as an awarding gap) – that the schooling of Black Caribbean students is primarily understood.
4. Though limited, this historical data can still be instructive with regard to the Black Caribbean group. The Black Caribbean group constituted the majority of the overall Black population in this epoch, as evidenced by 2001 census data, and the evidence showed an educational attainment gap between Black and White students.
5. The total number of points is 90, rather than 100.
6. Under “Attainment 8”, too, the distance from the all-pupil average is greater for Black Caribbean boys. Though Black Caribbean girls are also awarded the benchmark at below the all-pupil average, and both groups are awarded the benchmark at rates significantly below the average for their gender.
7. For the first year of the Gold Standard’s introduction, although 56.9% of students met the previous benchmark, only 43.8% met the new one. When the EBacc was introduced, attainment was 42.8% lower than it was under the previous “Gold Standard” (Gillborn et al. 2016), and in fact many students “cannot possibly attain an E. Bacc” (in 2012 only 21.6% of students entered examinations in the subjects required to qualify) (Gillborn 2014, 34).
8. The prison-industrial-complex refers to the expansion and privatisation of prisons, amidst the overlapping interests of governments and the industries that profit from prisons. However, “The Prison Industrial Complex is not just prisons themselves, it is mutually reinforcing web of relationships, between and not limited to, for example, prisons, the probation service, the police, the courts, all the companies that profit from transporting, feeding and exploiting prisoners, and so forth” (Empty Cages Collective n.d.).

## Acknowledgements

We wish to thank Claire Alexander for her thoughtful feedback on an earlier draft of this paper. We also extend sincere thanks to the three anonymous reviewers and John Solomos for his thoughtful advice throughout the review process.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

Work on this paper is supported by the Mandel Faculty Grant in the Humanities at Brandeis University, the alma mater of Bernard Coard.

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