

## Rethinking White Supremacy

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## Rethinking white supremacy

*Who counts in 'WhiteWorld'*

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**ABSTRACT** The article addresses the nature of power relations that sustain and disguise white racial hegemony in contemporary 'western' society. Following the insights offered by critical race theory (CRT), white supremacy is conceived as a comprehensive condition whereby the interests and perceptions of white subjects are continually placed centre stage and assumed as 'normal'. These processes are analysed through two very different episodes. The first example relates to a period of public crisis, a moment where 'what really matters' is thrown into relief by a set of exceptional circumstances, in this case, the London bombings of July 2005. The second example relates to the routine and unexceptional workings of national assessment mechanisms in the education system and raises the question whether assessments merely *record* educational inequity or actually *produce* it. These apparently divergent cases are linked by the centrality of white interests and the mobilization of structural and cultural forces to defend white power at the expense of the racialized 'Other'.

**KEYWORDS** antiracism ● assessment ● critical race theory ● education ● England ● policy studies ● racism ● white privilege ● white supremacy ● whiteness studies

## INTRODUCTION

What has become clear to me is my parents have a disdain towards 'whiteworld'. They came here to earn money. They came for no other reason. They don't trust white people, they don't engage with them more than they have to and certainly school was a white institution. ('Dennis', a Black Londoner whose parents migrated to England in the 1950s, quoted by McKenley, 2005: 16)

Most white people would probably be surprised by the idea of ‘White-World’; they see only the ‘world’, its white-ness is invisible to them because the racialized nature of politics, policing, education and every other sphere of public life is so deeply ingrained that it has become normalized – unremarked, and taken for granted. This is an exercise of power that goes beyond notions of ‘white *privilege*’ and can only be adequately understood through a language of power and domination: the issue goes beyond privilege, it is about *supremacy*.

The notion of ‘white privilege’ has become increasingly common as writers come to an awareness of the multitude of ways in which people who are identified as ‘white’ enjoy countless, often unrecognized, advantages in their daily lives:

I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks. (McIntosh, 1988: 291)

Peggy McIntosh famously listed 50 privileges that accrue from being identified as white, ranging from the ability to shop without the threat of being followed by security personnel, to the possibility of living free from harassment and the option to act however you choose without being seen, as emblematic of an entire racial group. This important work has proved useful to many critical educators trying to raise the consciousness of their students but, as Zeus Leonardo (2002, 2004) has argued, there has been a tendency for talk of ‘privilege’ to mask the structures and actions of domination that make possible, and sustain, white racial hegemony:

the theme of privilege obscures the subject of domination, or the agent of actions, because the situation is described as happening almost without the knowledge of whites. It conjures up images of domination happening behind the backs of whites, rather than on the backs of people of color. The study of white privilege begins to take on an image of domination without agents. (Leonardo, 2004: 138)

In addition, work on whiteness has not always retained a critical sense of reflexivity and, as Michael Apple has argued, can lapse into possessive individualism whereby it can ‘become one more excuse to recenter dominant voices’ by subverting a critical analysis and instead make an argument along the lines of ‘but enough about you, let me tell you about me’ (Apple, 1998: xi). Such uncritical forays into whiteness studies threaten to re-colonize the field of multicultural education (McLaren, 1995; Sheets, 2000), mask the structural power of white identifications so that whites are perversely portrayed as race victims (Apple, 2004; Howard, 2004) and serve to ensure that higher education remains an institution predominantly operated *by* white people *for* white people (Dlamini, 2002; Foster, 2005).

It is in this sense that many critics, especially those working within critical race theory (CRT), talk of white *supremacy* (see Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). In these analyses, white supremacy is not only, nor indeed primarily, associated with relatively small and extreme political movements that openly mobilize on the basis of race hatred (important and dangerous though such groups are): rather, supremacy is seen to relate to the operation of forces that saturate the everyday, mundane actions and policies that shape the world in the interests of white people (see Bush, 2004; Delgado and Stefancic, 1997):

[By] 'white supremacy' I do not mean to allude only to the self-conscious racism of white supremacist hate groups. I refer instead to a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings. (Ansley, 1997: 592)

CRT is sometimes attacked for placing race at the centre of the analysis, seemingly to the detriment of gendered and class-based analyses. In fact, a good deal of CRT takes very seriously the intersections of raced, classed and gendered inequities (see, for example, Parker et al., 1999; Wing, 1997). However, at its core, CRT demands that race and racism never be relegated to the sidelines or imagined to be a complexifying element in a situation that is *really* about class, or *really* about gender. In this article I examine two very different examples of how white supremacy currently operates. The specifics of each case relate to contemporary England, but the wider mechanisms are common to many similar 'western' states that claim to practice universalism and equality of opportunity for all. The first example relates to a period of public crisis, a moment where 'what really matters' is thrown into relief by a set of exceptional circumstances, in this case, the London bombings of July 2005. The second example relates to the routine and unexceptional workings of national assessment mechanisms in the education system. These apparently divergent cases are linked by the centrality of white interests and the mobilization of structural and cultural forces to defend white power at the expense of the racialized 'Other'.

## **LONDON, JULY 2005: THE CONDITIONAL STATUS OF PEOPLE OF COLOUR**

A central tenet of CRT is the understanding that the status of black and other minority groups is always conditional upon the approval of whites. Even where apparent advances in civil rights have been won, such as the

landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954, they have frequently relied on the perception that white and minority interests converged on a particular issue: e.g. the need to demonstrate US democracy in action in the midst of the Cold War (Bell, 1995). So long as whites do not feel overly threatened – or better still, perceive some self-interest in the situation – then minorities appear to be included. However, there is always the threat that this might be removed at the whim of whites:

Ever present, always lurking in the shadow of current events, is the real possibility that an unexpected coincidence of events at some point in the future – like those that occurred in the past – will persuade whites to reach a consensus that a major benefit to the nation justifies an ultimate sacrifice of black rights – or lives. (Bell, 1992: 13)

To many whites, such an analysis might seem outrageous, but its perceptiveness was revealed in dramatic fashion in the summer of 2005 when a series of bombs were exploded in London. The reaction, by government, media and whites on the street, offers the clearest demonstration of the conditional status of people of colour in contemporary England.

### ***The explosions***

On July 7 2005, 52 people were killed in four separate explosions in central London: three on underground ‘tube’ trains, a fourth on a London bus. The bombs were timed to coincide with the morning rush hour. No formal claims of responsibility were verified but the assumption was that these amounted to ‘Islamic Terrorist’ attacks. Exactly two weeks later, on July 21, four more attacks were carried out (again, three at underground stations; a fourth on a bus). Unlike the previous attacks, however, none of the devices exploded. The would-be bombers escaped, but suspects were arrested over the following few days.

The attacks dominated the news and political agenda over subsequent weeks and punctured the existing political/discursive settlement around ‘race’ and equity. This period provided numerous examples of how the feelings, experiences and, indeed, the very lives of ‘outsider’ (non-white) groups were readily sacrificed to the assumed imperative to protect a version of reality that took for granted (and reinforced) the supremacy of the white subject.

### ***The counter-explosions***

The most dramatic example of the white counter-explosion came on July 22, a day after the subsequent abortive attacks, when Jean Charles de Menezes (a 22-year-old Brazilian national) was shot dead on a train. Eyewitness reports talked of the man being held down by two police officers

while another jumped on his prone body and fired repeatedly into his head at point blank range.<sup>1</sup> The shooting revealed what was later termed a policy of '*shoot-to-kill to protect*', whereby suspected suicide bombers are shot in the head to prevent the possibility of triggering the suspected bomb. In the aftermath of the killing, several right-wing newspapers carried prominent stories defending the actions of the police and arguing against the possibility of the officers being prosecuted. The *Daily Express* (18 August 2005) used its front page to contrast pictures of Mr de Menezes (labelled 'victim') and one of the suspected bombers (labelled 'suspect') – implicitly calling on the white racist stereotype that all non-whites look alike. A columnist in the country's biggest selling newspaper, *The Sun*, went further, stating that the victim 'bore an uncanny, unfortunate resemblance to the suspected suicide bomber . . .' (Littlejohn, 2005). Much of the press followed a similarly strident line, arguing that although they had killed an innocent man, the police had actually done their job appropriately and should do so again in the future:

It is crucial, however, that the correct conclusions are drawn from this appalling tragedy. The first and most important point is that the police response to the threat they believed was posed at Stockwell station was correct, and indeed was the *only* action they could responsibly have taken. (Phillips, 2005: original emphasis)

The murder of an innocent person of colour was the most extreme end of a spectrum of attacks that followed the London bombings. In the three weeks following July 7, the number of reported 'religious hate crimes' in London rose more than 600 percent, from 40 in the same period in 2004 to 269 (BBC News On-Line, 2005b). This official figure almost certainly underestimates the true level of harassment and, of course, does not include the interpersonal threats and suspicions faced by people of colour when they boarded trains in the aftermath of the bombings. In addition, a form of officially condoned harassment was enacted through the use of racial profiling.

People of colour using the underground system knew that racial profiling was in place, as they endured searches while white people passed onto the system without question. Official confirmation came in a newspaper interview with the Chief Constable of the British Transport Police – responsible for policing public transport – on the use of 'intelligence-led stop-and-search':

Mr Johnston made it clear he would not shy away from targeting those groups likely to present the greatest threat – most obviously young Asian Men.

He said: 'Intelligence-led stop-and-searches have got to be the way,' adding that there were 'challenges for us in managing diversity as an issue' but that 'we should not bottle out over this. We should not waste time searching old white ladies'. (Wolmar, 2005)

Of particular importance is the fact that racial profiling was defended as the only way of keeping normality (*white* normality that is). Searching everyone was seen as unworkable – ‘doing the terrorists’ job for them’ – but subjecting minority passengers to such suspicion, disruption and humiliation was seen as preserving normality:

Technological solutions such as scanners to check people entering the stations were dismissed by Mr Johnston. ‘You could do one in a hundred or one in 200, but if you tried to do any more, people trying to get into Oxford Circus station would back up to Bond Street. You would just be doing the terrorists’ job for them’, he said.

Keeping the Tube and the national railway system operating normally is now a police priority. (*The Mail on Sunday*, 31 July 2005, p. 9)

On the same day the BBC on-line news site posted reaction to the story from a Home Office Minister, Hazel Blears MP. She was quoted as follows:

She [Hazel Blears] told BBC News: ‘That’s absolutely the right thing for the police to do.’

What it means is if your intelligence in a particular area tells you that you’re looking for somebody of a particular description, perhaps with particular clothing on, then clearly you’re going to exercise that power in that way.

She said it was important people were kept informed and those who were stopped were given an explanation.

‘I think most ordinary decent people will entirely accept that in terms of their own safety and security,’ she added. (BBC News On-Line, 2005c)

In this way, racial profiling was officially condoned and anyone objecting was, by definition, not an ‘ordinary, decent’ person. The ‘normality’ of life for white people was made the priority and the cost of criminalizing people of colour was judged a necessity – even to the point where a man died at the hands of the state and the police’s actions were defended as appropriate.

The reaction to the London bombings, therefore, provides a clear example of how white supremacy operates in contemporary Britain. That is, when the white power-holding group perceived its interests to be threatened, then no amount of human rights legislation nor self-congratulatory rhetoric about ‘British decency and fair-play’ stood in the way of British citizens (of non-white appearance) facing a radical reappraisal of their worth and significance. But the extraordinary nature of these events should not be interpreted as signifying that white supremacy only exists under such charged circumstances. Indeed, it could be argued that an even more grotesque example of white supremacy can be seen in the mundane workings of the education system, where black success is viewed as surprising and failure is normal, even when it appears to be produced by the system itself.<sup>2</sup>

## ASSESSMENT AND EDUCATIONAL INEQUITY: CHANGING THE TEST SO THAT THE *RIGHT* PEOPLE FAIL

It is striking that whenever critical scholars propose a case where racism is implicated, there is a tendency for others (usually, but not exclusively, white people) to argue that some other factor is *really* to blame. For every black student who fails an exam or is expelled from school (forms of symbolic violence that black students endure in disproportionate numbers), there is always another *possible* explanation. One of the clearest cases of this within the academy can be seen in the methodological questions raised about antiracist research, where (it has been argued) the failure to *prove* the existence of racism to the satisfaction of the people in question is sufficient reason to refrain from making such a damaging criticism (see Foster, 1993; Foster et al., 1996; Hammersley, 1995, 2000; for a reply see Gillborn, 1998). Indeed, even in signature cases like the murder of Stephen Lawrence (a case that ultimately led to the reform of British race equality legislation) there are always additional *possible* explanations. For example, as Stephen lay dying on the pavement (having been stabbed by a gang of white youths) a 14-year-old onlooker was astonished that none of the police officers present took action in response to his injuries: the official report notes:

*She was amazed that no-one was attending to the body on the floor or trying to stem the flow of blood. She saw that there was a lot of blood and her knowledge of First Aid told her that something ought to have been done.* (Macpherson, 1999: 57, original emphasis)

The attending police officers claimed not to have seen that there was a significant amount of blood and to have thought it best to leave Stephen in the position in which he had collapsed. This claim, essentially one of negligence rather than racism, was accepted by the inquiry team. So, rather than spending more time on definitions (of racism, supremacy, etc.) it may be useful to begin by imagining a more simple set of propositions and see where that leads us. This use of an alternative narrative approach is common in CRT, where storytelling is frequently used to help cast familiar issues in a fresh light and view things through a new lens (see Bell, 1990; Delgado, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997; Williams, 1987).

### ***The 'wrong' result: a story about assessment***

Once upon a time there was a deeply racist society. In this imaginary society racism saturates all public agencies. This is not a generally nice place where the occasional nasty individual spoils things. No, this is a society where racism leaves its imprint on virtually every aspect of life, from birth to death (and everything in between).

Now, of course, in a society so deeply patterned by racism not everything is plain sailing. People don't simply accept their subjugation no matter how long it has been practised. There are continual points of conflict and resistance, but most of the time these are kept in check and barely register on the 'mainstream' consciousness. Consequently the dominant group is able to sustain its preferred fiction; that the despised people only have themselves to blame for their misfortune. This is possible because – in this imaginary place – racism is present throughout every major part of society. Racism patterns its polity, its academy and its public services, including the police and the schools.

Until that is, one day, something goes wrong.

One day it is discovered that, despite all the odds, the despised group is excelling in school.

Totally contrary to the dominant group's view of how things should be, it emerges that the despised group is really good at something. And to make matters worse, this is not something that can be dismissed as frivolous or entertaining: like being good dancers, musicians or athletes.

It emerges that the despised group are excelling in a school test.

They are not yet dominating the entire educational system, but it becomes clear that on one particular kind of test, they are not just holding their own – they are the very highest performers.

The dominant group are stunned: how can this be?

Now, of course, in this imaginary racist society such a thing cannot be permitted.

But what is to be done?

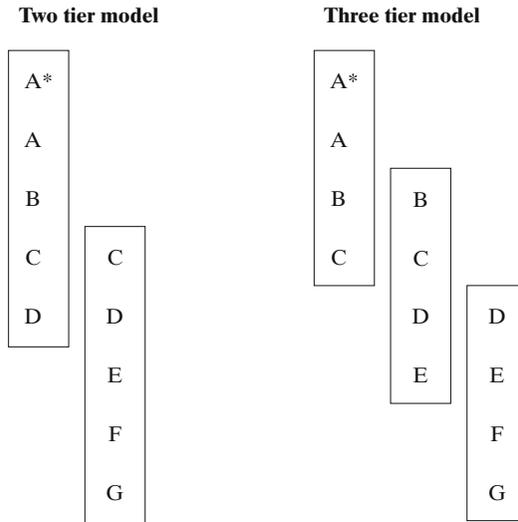
An obvious solution is to simply bar the despised group from taking the test. You can't pass what you're not allowed to enter.

Good answer. And, under certain circumstances, that strategy would work.

Indeed, we have an example very close to home . . .

The dominant examination at the end of compulsory schooling in England is the GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education). The GCSE was introduced in 1988 and, since then, most subjects have adopted an approach known as 'tiering' (see Figure 1). In most subjects, teachers allocate pupils to one of two separate exam tiers (in mathematics there are currently three tiers). There is no dual entry and the tier places a higher and lower limit on the grades available. Those in the foundation tier cannot do better than a grade C in most subjects – meaning that study at advanced level may be out of the question (because the necessary grades A\* to B *cannot* be awarded in that tier). In mathematics, the foundation tier currently denies even a grade C: usually taken as the minimum requirement for entry to higher education and the professions.

In a study of tiering in two London secondary schools, Deborah Youdell and I discovered that two thirds of black students were entered for maths in the lowest tier (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000); no matter how many questions they answered correctly, therefore, two out of three black children could not possibly achieve the required pass grade in maths because the examination simply did not permit it.<sup>3</sup>



**Figure 1** Tiers and the grades available in GCSE examinations (England)

And so, if we return to the story of a mythical crude racist society, we can see that denying entry to the test might provide a solution. GCSE tiers are not widely understood (by students or parents, let alone the general public). Indeed, the case of GCSE tiering offers a neat example of how the dominant group could respond without even having to compromise its preferred narrative – that the despised group fails because of its own deficiencies rather than because of racism. But in the imaginary racist society of my story, the problem is even bigger than that:

In my story, the despised group is excelling at a test that every pupil must take. You see, in the place I'm asking you to imagine, the state has decreed that all children must be tested throughout their school careers. They are each stamped with a unique code number and a log of their successes – and failures – follows them throughout the system.

And so everyone must take the test. But if the dominant group cannot restrict entry to the test, it seems that only one course of action remains; change the test.

The test must be redesigned so that the despised group no longer succeed. Simple.

But, of course, such a crass and obviously racist set of events could never occur in the real world. There would be an outcry. Wouldn't there?

### ***Once upon a time, when black children did best***

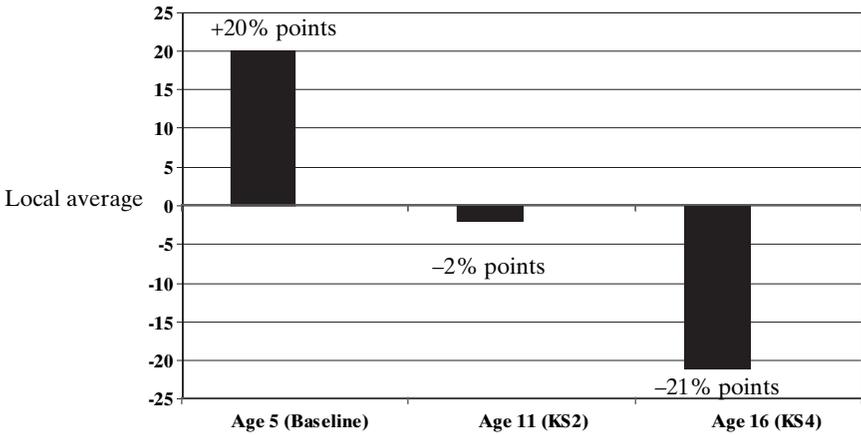
In 2000, I co-authored a national report with Heidi Safia Mirza, Professor of Race Equality at the University of Middlesex. The report was an

independent review of evidence sponsored and published by the official schools inspectorate, the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED). The work was widely reported in the media (including coverage on national TV, radio and newspapers) and certain findings received particular attention. First, in conflict with the dominant stereotypes, we found that there was a great deal of variation in attainment by minority groups in different parts of the country. In 2000, there was no legal obligation to monitor education results by ethnic origin but an increasing number of local education authorities (LEAs) were starting to gather this data, especially where the statistics were needed in order to bid for additional resources from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). It was precisely this impulse that led more than one hundred local authorities to provide data which, after a somewhat protracted series of negotiations, we were able to access and analyse.<sup>4</sup> Contrary to general expectations, we discovered that for each of the principal minority ethnic groups there was at least one LEA where that group were the most likely to achieve five or more higher grade GCSE passes (Gillborn and Mirza, 2000: 8–11). This surprised many, including the DfES, who had previously not realized the scale of variation within (as well as between) different groups.

A second finding that startled many observers arose from the same dataset. Most of the 118 LEAs from which we had data only reported ethnic breakdowns from the age of 11 onwards (the end of Key Stage 2 (KS2) in the national curriculum). However, six LEAs also monitored pupils' achievements at age 5, in the so called 'baseline assessments' carried out when children entered compulsory schooling. The data on all six LEAs indicated that black attainments fell relative to the LEA average as the children moved through school. The data on one LEA was especially striking. In the largest LEA in our sample (also one of the biggest authorities in the country), we found that black children were the *highest* achieving of all groups in the baseline assessments (see Figure 2).

At age 5, black children were significantly more likely to reach the required levels: 20 percentage points above the local average. At age 11, however, black children in the same LEA were performing *below* the local average. And at age 16, the end of compulsory schooling, the inequality was so bad that black children were the *lowest* performing of all the principal groups: 21 percentage points below the average (Gillborn and Mirza, 2000: 16–17).

In the report, Heidi Mirza and I noted that previous work had already begun to document the relative decline in black attainment at later stages in the education system. A year earlier, research for the pressure group Race on the Agenda (Richardson and Wood, 1999) had shown a similar pattern between the ages of 11 and 16. Their study included data on 10 LEAs in and around London, showing that between the end of primary school and the end of secondary school, on average, African Caribbean

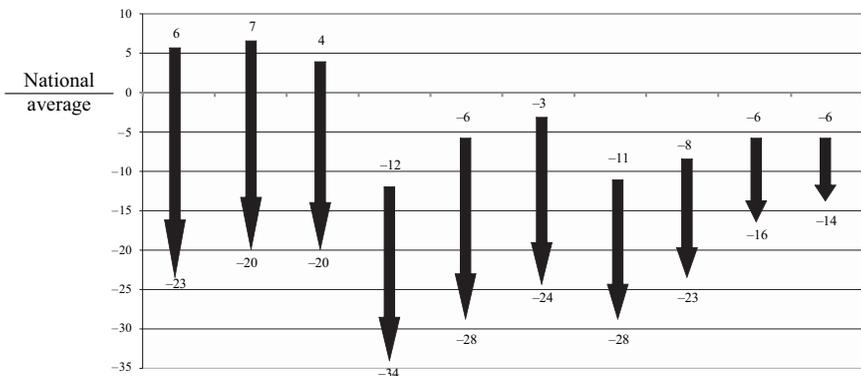


**Figure 2** Black performance relative to the LEA average at selected ages, 1999

Source: Adapted from Gillborn and Mirza (2000), Figure 5

pupils dropped 20 percentage points relative to the national average (see Figure 3).

Prior to the OFSTED report, therefore, data were already suggesting that black/white inequalities might be worsening as children move through the system. What marked out the OFSTED report for particular attention, however, was the prominence of the report’s sponsor and the range of our data. Unlike previous analyses, the data in Figure 2 started at age 5, much earlier than any other available data. In addition, by showing black children as the *highest* achievers in the baseline assessments, the data fundamentally challenged the assumption that black children entered the school system



**Figure 3** Black performance relative to national average at age 11 and age 16, 10 LEAs, 1998

Source: Adapted from Richardson and Wood (1999), Table 4

poorly prepared (a common argument at the time). This was an important finding that quickly passed into the wider arena of debate on race and achievement: this view of black children's attainments is now very widely cited in the UK. For example, the OFSTED report is often used as a major source on race and education in textbooks.<sup>5</sup> The finding on 5-year-olds has passed into received wisdom and is widely quoted, for example, by newspapers as part of the context for wider debates, and frequently cited by politicians:

According to government figures, black pupils start primary school with some of the highest scores in baseline assessments of initial ability. But after two years they begin to slip behind other pupils. (Muir, 2005)

When African and Afro-Caribbean children start school at five they do as well in tests as white and Asian children. By the age of 11 their achievement levels begin to drop off. By 16 there has been a collapse. (Diane Abbott MP, 2005)

It is remarkable that in such a short time (less than five years) this once startling fact became an accepted part of the educational landscape. Unfortunately there is something even more remarkable, because in that same five-year period, the system of assessment on entry to school changed, and so did the patterns of attainment: black children are no longer the highest achieving group, in fact, they are now among the *lowest* performers.

### ***New assessment, new outcomes: a familiar story?***

The term 'foundation stage' has been officially applied to the period between a child's third birthday, and the end of their reception (first) year in primary school and a 'Foundation Stage Profile' has replaced the baseline assessments that used to take place when children entered primary school. There are several important points to note about the Foundation Stage Profile. First, it is entirely based on teachers' judgements: The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) describe it this way:

Throughout the foundation stage, as part of the learning and teaching process, practitioners need to assess each child's development [. . .] These assessments are made on the basis of the practitioner's accumulating observations and knowledge of the whole child. By the end of the final year of the foundation stage, the Foundation Stage Profile will provide a way of summing up that knowledge. (QCA, 2003: 1)

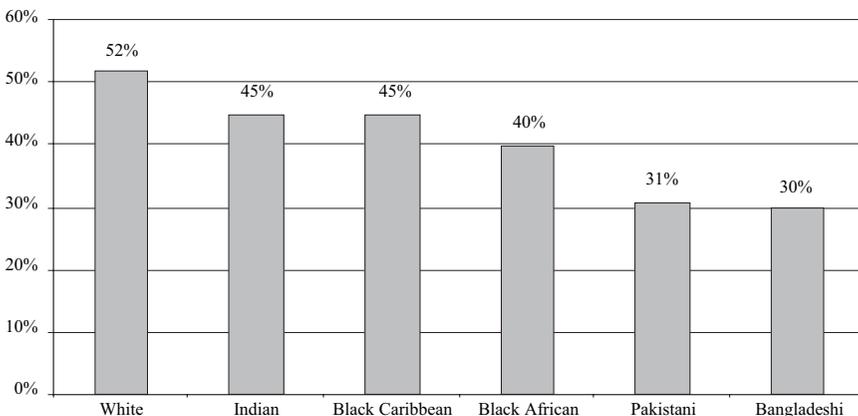
A second key point about the Foundation Stage Profile is that it is relatively complex in terms of its coverage. Overall there are six 'areas of learning': Personal, social and emotional development; Communication, language and literacy; Mathematical development; Knowledge and understanding of the world; Physical development; and Creative development. These six areas include 13 different 'scales', which are assessed individually in relation to specific 'Early Learning Goals'.

A final significant point in relation to the Foundation Stage Profile is that the system was only introduced relatively recently and is still surrounded by some uncertainty. Indeed, there are important questions about the reliability of the results. When reporting on the first set of data, for example, the DfES stated:

*The results should be treated with caution as this is the first year that such data have been collected.* The data result from a new statutory assessment for which teachers have received limited and variable training and the moderation of results within and between local education authorities (LEAs) has been patchy. (DfES, 2004: 1: emphasis in original)

In fact, the DfES were so worried about the quality of the assessments that when the results were first published (in June 2004) the document was entitled ‘*experimental statistics*’ and the National Statistics logo was deliberately not used (DfES, 2004: 1). This first analysis of data from the Foundation Stage Profile made no reference to ethnicity at all. About six months later, however, the DfES made use of the same material in an overview of data on ethnicity and education. This time there was a partial breakdown of results in relation to the principal minority ethnic groups (DfES, 2005). This is highly significant because it was the first time that any data from the Foundation Stage Profile had been published with an ethnic component.

The DfES presentation includes a brief explanation about the foundation stage and a note of caution about the level of teacher training involved and the moderation of results. The document then presents a breakdown of results in relation to one of the 13 scales (Figure 4) and a summary of key findings. The discussion begins with the following statement:



**Figure 4** Foundation Stage Profile 2003: Language for communication and thinking, by ethnic origin

Source: DfES (2005), Figure 3

Patterns of achievement for minority ethnic groups in Early Learning Goals would appear to broadly mirror attainment gaps at older ages. (DfES, 2005: 8)

Interestingly, there is no reference to how this finding sits alongside previous work in the field, such as the earlier baseline test results. Nevertheless, the document notes that this pattern is common across all of the 13 scales that make up the Foundation Stage Profile:

Pakistani and Bangladeshi children . . . perform less well, followed by Black African and Black Caribbean children (with all groups scoring less well than the average on all 13 of the scales). (DfES, 2005: 8)

There is no further data on race inequity and the Foundation Stage Profiles. The DfES document makes no further mention of the foundation stage and there is no comment at all about previous assessments of minority children's learning on entry to compulsory schooling. The reader is left with a sense of continuity, not change. But these findings run contrary to the now widely held belief that black children do well on entry to compulsory school. As I have already noted (above) this belief is stated and re-stated: it appears in textbooks, in the media and even in political discourse. And yet the DfES published the first ever ethnic analysis of results from the new assessments and the pattern was reversed without comment. It is difficult to overestimate the significance of these events: the received wisdom has been turned on its head; black children have moved from being 'over-achievers' to 'under-achievers'; and the assessment that produced these outcomes is acknowledged to be based on training and moderation that was 'patchy'. And yet the results stand. The new pattern of attainment for 5 year olds is reported without further comment and one of the key issues that had raised questions about black children's treatment in schools has been erased, almost overnight.

And what about attainments in the local authority that Mirza and I had highlighted? The DfES data are based on national returns and, as already noted (above), results can differ substantially from one LEA to another. With the cooperation of that LEA, we can judge how far the national picture is reflected at a local level: the result is far from encouraging.

The table reproduced in Table 1 shows attainment in all six areas of learning in the Foundation Stage Profile broken down by ethnicity and gender. The table relates to the same LEA that featured in the OFSTED report of 2000 (Figure 2). In order to retain the anonymity of the local authority I have removed the original data and inserted a figure (positive or negative) to show how each cell's value relates to the respective white performance.<sup>6</sup> For example, -7 percent in the upper left-hand cell denotes that 7 percent fewer 'Mixed race White/African Caribbean' boys were judged to have met or exceeded the target when compared with white boys.

In total there are 180 different cells relating to minority attainment in the table: 159 of the cells (almost 90%) show minority children being

**Table 1** Foundation stage assessments by ethnic group and gender, 2004 (proportion of pupils achieving the majority of the early learning goals in each area of learning; percentage points comparison with white pupils)

Ethnic group	Personal, social and emotional development			Communication, language and literacy			Mathematical development			Knowledge and understanding of the world			Physical development			Creative development		
	B	G	All	B	G	All	B	G	All	B	G	All	B	G	All	B	G	All
White	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Mixed race white/ African Caribbean	-7%	-1%	-4%	-4%	-4%	-3%	-5%	-3%	-3%	-5%	+1%	-2%	+3%	+1%	+2%	+3%	+4%	+4%
Mixed race white/ Asian	-9%	-5%	-8%	-1%	-8%	-5%	-5%	-11%	-8%	-11%	-2%	-8%	-6%	-7%	-6%	-9%	-1%	-7%
Mixed race other	-10%	-7%	-8%	-7%	-10%	-8%	-10%	-9%	-9%	-11%	-9%	-10%	-4%	-3%	-3%	-11%	-7%	-10%
Indian	-7%	-7%	-7%	-5%	-9%	-7%	-8%	-12%	-10%	-15%	-13%	-14%	-5%	-8%	-6%	-12%	-9%	-11%
Pakistani	-16%	-14%	-15%	-20%	-24%	-12%	-23%	-22%	-22%	-24%	-24%	-24%	-9%	-8%	-8%	-20%	-15%	-18%
Bangladeshi	-15%	-19%	-17%	-26%	-29%	-27%	-26%	-29%	-27%	-28%	-28%	-28%	-10%	-7%	-8%	-22%	-17%	-20%
Asian other	-7%	-8%	-7%	-6%	-11%	-8%	-12%	-10%	-10%	-12%	-12%	-12%	+1%	=	+1%	-6%	-14%	-10%
Black Caribbean	-13%	-7%	-10%	-14%	-11%	-12%	-9%	-7%	-7%	-8%	-10%	-9%	-2%	-4%	-2%	-5%	-5%	-5%
Black African	-16%	+2%	-6%	-23%	-11%	-15%	-17%	-7%	-11%	-28%	-12%	-20%	-1%	=	=	-18%	+3%	-6%
Chinese	-9%	-5%	-6%	-2%	+2%	+1%	-5%	-4%	-4%	-16%	=	-8%	-1%	=	=	+10%	-4%	+3%
All groups	-7%	-6%	-6%	-8%	-10%	-9%	-9%	-9%	-9%	-10%	-9%	-10%	-4%	-3%	-3%	-8%	-6%	-7%

ranked lower than their white counterparts. There are just 15 cells where minority children are ranked higher than whites and most of these are within the areas of ‘physical development’ and ‘creative development’: domains where traditional stereotypes would more easily accept such performance.

This change in patterns of attainment is hugely important. It is these scores that schools will use to judge the progress of the students in later assessments. Potentially, the lower attainments of black students in subsequent stages of the education system will no longer be viewed as a relative drop in performance; they may simply be viewed as performing in line with their lower starting points.

### ***How did we get here? It's not a conspiracy, it's worse than that***

Clearly these developments raise a series of important questions. Unfortunately, baseline assessments were not around for very long and there was no single national system – indeed, more than 90 different schemes were accredited. Consequently, it is difficult retrospectively to identify reliable information on the various approaches that were used. In contrast, the new Foundation Stage Profile is a national scheme; it is compulsory; and it is entirely teacher assessed. This latter point (the reliance on teacher assessment) may offer a clue to part of the mechanism behind the changes. Work on assessment has long argued that teachers’ views of group characteristics (such as class, gender and ethnicity) can affect their scores (e.g. see Gipps, 1994; Kornhaber, 2004). It is well known, for example, that black students tend to be over-represented in low-ranked teaching groups when teachers’ judgements are used to inform selection within schools (in systems such as tracking, setting, banding, and tiering: for relevant data and discussions see Connolly (1998); Gillborn (2004a, 2004b) Oakes (1990) Oakes et al. (2004) and QCA (2000). In addition, in their review of key debates about assessment, Sanders and Horn (1995), quote the following:

In England in the late 1980s, when the assessments that make up the General Certificate of Secondary Education were changed to put more emphasis on performance tasks (which are assessed by classroom teachers) and less on written answers, the gaps between the average scores of various ethnic groups increased rather than narrowed. (Maeroff, 1991: 281) quoted in Sanders and Horn, 1995)

In addition, the change in the *timing* of the Foundation Stage Profile may be implicated in the new pattern of results. The new assessment is completed by teachers at the end of the children’s ‘reception’ year, whereas most ‘baseline assessments’ in the previous system were completed within the first few weeks of children entering school. Some antiracist practitioners have suggested to me that the relative deterioration in black students

scores (noted previously in Figures 3 and 4) may take effect during this first year.<sup>7</sup>

*How* these changes in outcome have come about, therefore, is an important question. However, even more important is the fact that the changes occurred without apparent disquiet or possibly even without being recognized. Boldly stated, the facts are simple: in recent years black students' attainments at the start of school appear to have radically decreased relative to their white peers; this has coincided with the reform of assessment procedures at that stage; and yet the pattern is reported officially without query and without further comment. This looks suspiciously like the imaginary racist society in my earlier story.

However, there is a key difference. Unlike the society in that story, there is no suggestion here that the changes in England have been manufactured deliberately in any way. This is not to deny their impact and severity: the changes that have happened are clearly *racist in their outcome* insofar as black students have been markedly disadvantaged. But there is no evidence of conscious intent: there is no conspiracy. It is more frightening than that. Rather than being generated by a deliberate strategy (one that is readily open to exposure and reversal) these changes appear to have resulted from the *normal* workings of the education system – a system that places race equality at the very margins of debate and takes no action when black students are judged to be failing. Policies are enacted with little or no regard to how they will impact on minority ethnic students (Gillborn, 2005). This is demonstrably the case in relation to GCSE tiering; in relation to selection and tracking within schools; and it is true of the assessment system more generally (see Ladson-Billings, 2004). It is difficult to imagine a contrary situation where no action would be taken were a new assessment system to result in white children being out-performed by their peers in every minority group.

## CONCLUSION

The logics of empire are still with us, bound to the fabric of our daily being-in-the-world; woven into our posture toward others; connected to the muscles of our eyes; dipped in the chemical relations that excite and calm us; structured into the language of our perceptions. We cannot will our racist logics away. We need to work hard to eradicate them. We need to struggle with a formidable resolve in order to overcome that which we are afraid to confirm exists let alone confront in the battleground of our souls. (McLaren, 1998: 63)

Writing about whiteness is increasingly fashionable but serious, critical engagement with the structures of racial domination remains mostly a minority pastime – in every sense of the phrase. As Peter McLaren notes,

understanding the processes through which white racial hegemony is structured and maintained is more than a rational exercise of the mind. These issues touch upon deeply ingrained, often visceral aspects of our 'daily being-in-the-world'.

In this article, I have adopted a position informed by my ongoing attempt to apply critical race theory to an analysis of educational inequity outside North America (see also Gillborn, 2006). I have tried to follow William Tate's advice and view CRT scholarship as 'an enactment of hybridity' (Tate, 1999: 260). Consequently I have sought to blend a combination of cultural criticism, use of different narrative forms, and critical sociological policy studies in an attempt to explore how white supremacy operates in a place that most white people take for granted, while many Others recognize their location in a false and oppressive reality for which 'WhiteWorld' is an entirely appropriate term.

I have explored two contrasting episodes: one, the bombing of London in the summer of 2005, an extraordinary period of heightened public anxiety where discourses of race, ethnicity, belonging and Other-ness were prominently deployed in media coverage of events that highlighted the racialized fault-lines that are usually hidden beneath the surface of civil society. The other episode could not be more different: the unnoticed, literally unremarkable changes in an assessment system that appear to have erased, virtually overnight, the only part of the education system where black children had out-performed their white counterparts. The episode dramatically highlights a fundamental question for radical educators; that is, does assessment do more than merely *record* inequity, or does assessment *produce* inequity?

Despite these superficial differences, however, both cases indicate the fundamental position of white identifications and interests. They also highlight the numerous ways in which racism can operate through the accepted and mundane processes. This challenges the assumption, common to liberal democratic societies in general, that race inequality is a temporary aberration and that race is a marginal issue in society at large, and the education system in particular. A critical perspective on race and education highlights that – whatever the rhetoric – race inequality has been a constant and central feature of the education system. In this article, I have tried to show how even the most dramatic of setbacks can happen without apparent malice, and even without comment. Until we address the presence of racism, as a fundamental defining characteristic of the education system, the present situation is unlikely to change in any meaningful sense, regardless of superficial rhetorical commitments to inclusion, civil rights and social justice.

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## Notes

- 1 For an account of the killing see BBC News On-Line (2005a).
- 2 By 'black' I mean children who identify their ethnic heritage as broadly 'Black Caribbean' or 'Black African'. In some educational research a composite black group is used (also sometimes known as 'African Caribbean'). In other sources separate groups are counted. These complications are inevitable given the fluid nature of 'race' categories and the variety of approaches used in contemporary research.
- 3 In the spring of 2005 the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) announced plans to remove the three-tier model in mathematics from 2006 onwards. The restrictions and inequities built into the two-tier model, however, will remain unaltered.
- 4 One hundred and eighteen LEAs granted permission to use their data on the understanding that they would not be identified by name in the report.
- 5 Gillborn and Mirza (2000) is a prominent source in many introductory texts, including Browne (2002: 239–45), where it is one of three principal sources used to introduce the section on race and educational attainment; see also Haralambos and Holborn (2004: 774–5, 777, 778–9); and Holborn and Langley (2004: 164–5).
- 6 This percentage point difference is calculated by subtracting the white performance from the respective minority ethnic performance. Hypothetically, for example, if 40 percent of white students reached the target but only 30 percent of 'Black Caribbean' students, then the value for the latter would be –10%.
- 7 Antiracist colleagues working in early years education have suggested to me that black students are often viewed as relatively advanced when they first enter school: unlike many white students, frequently they can write their names and read simple sentences (a sign of the high value placed on education in minority households). However, it is possible that even during the very first year of schooling, such positive evaluations are overridden by teachers who come to see them stereotypically as a source of trouble while, on the other hand, their white peers have time to catch up and show what they are capable of.

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