

## Too hot to handle: African Caribbean pupils and students as toxic consumers and commodities in the educational market

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**Too hot to handle: African Caribbean pupils and students as toxic consumers and commodities in the educational market**

## Abstract

Troyna (in Mason, 2000: 63) notes 'there is a well-established relationship between social class and educational outcomes', particularly as educational success can facilitate upward social mobility by increasing labour market opportunities. This paper highlights the symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2010 [1984]) of the educational market, where the progress of Birmingham UK's African Caribbean<sup>1</sup> pupils and students are concerned. Insidious discriminatory practices in secondary and higher education (H.E.) are examined to assess the difficulty distinguishing between racism and competition in the educational market. School exclusions are analysed vis-à-vis their impact on GCSE attainment, subsequent opportunities for university access and labour market progression. As H.E. participation is an important factor of social mobility, university degrees are effectively symbolic capital<sup>2</sup>. They can improve life-chances by increasing access to the high-income professions, where individuals can improve their class status and reduce the risk of poverty. This paper argues that as a consequence of State policies, advocating private sector intervention in education, racial discrimination is now hidden within the vicissitudes of the educational free market.

**Keywords:** African Caribbean, Birmingham, Education, Risk, Schools, Universities

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<sup>1</sup> There is not enough room here to articulate the social construction of ethnic categories. For a more detailed and in-depth explanation see Ratcliffe (2004). African Caribbean, Black Caribbean and Black are used interchangeably in this paper, in reference to the British born descendants of post-war West Indian immigrants.

<sup>2</sup> In the context of this paper higher education qualifications are viewed in the Bourdieusian (1979; 2010, [1984]) sense as symbols of power, particularly as they can be exchanged for economic capital.

## **Too hot to handle: African Caribbean pupils and students as toxic consumers and commodities in the educational market**

### **The context of competition for educational *Goods***

The Education Reform Act 1988 (ERA1988) was the pivotal piece of legislation, which redirected previous political concerns away from racial equality in education, towards a colour-blind neo-liberal<sup>3</sup> agenda. The ERA1988 transformed the educational sector into a market, encouraging choice and competition, whilst overlooking the racist practices that systematically disadvantaged African Caribbean children (see Swann, 1985; Troyna and Carrington, 1990). Following the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition's success in the 2010 General Election<sup>4</sup>, neo-liberal austerity policies have had an increasing influence on the culture of competition in the contemporary educational market. Where social policies were once implemented by the State to mediate fairness in market situations<sup>5</sup>, austerity measures now encourage non-State intervention, and the market is validated 'as the primary mechanism, whereby individuals secure personal security and well-being' (Brodie in Beck, 2007: 685).

Despite several political changes, following the 1988 marketisation of education, African Caribbeans are still not attaining at the same rate as their ethnic counterparts (see Troyna and Carrington, 1990; Gillborn and Youdell, 2000; Graham and Robinson, 2004; Mamon, 2004; Mirza, 2007; Gillborn, 2008a; 2008b; DfE, 2012b). The philosophy of the political right, which suggests that the market makes no distinction between 'race', class or gender, implies that in educational market situations ethnic disparities in attainment can be explained by differences in ability, rather than structural inequalities or discriminatory practices. This paper examines how the ideology of the free market in the education sector conceals practices of racial discrimination, which constrain the social mobility of African Caribbean pupils and students.

The *supposedly* laissez-faire position of the State (Sivanandan, 2013), particularly where equality legislation and policies are now concerned (Ratcliffe, 2015), defines how 'the means

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<sup>3</sup> Neo-liberalism is the way in which contemporary Western capitalism is organised. It is based on the principles of a small State and the absolute belief that free markets enable individual freedom and liberty, by increasing choice and competition (see Sivanandan, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> The Coalition Government replaced New Labour in 2010. The shift in political administration has led to the introduction of a raft of policies, aimed at reducing public sector spending and increasing the role of the private sector in what was previously State funded interests (ibid, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> There is not enough room here to detail the State's Assimilation, Multi-Cultural and Anti-Racist educational policies of the late 1960s to the mid 1980s. For further details see: Troyna and Carrington (1990).

of life is mediated through the market'<sup>6</sup> (Curran, 2013: 57) in modern Britain. Consequently, managing the risk of poverty is also understood vis-à-vis wealth differentials, influenced by the acquisition of commodities<sup>7</sup> perceived as *Goods* and *Bads* (ibid 2013: 45). The application of Beck's concept of risk (1992; 2007), alongside Curran's (2013) critique of his class reductionist perspective<sup>8</sup>, suggests that African Caribbeans have to acquire educational *Goods* and avoid the acquisition of *Bads*, in order to reduce their exposure to the risk of long-term poverty. Educational *Goods* is defined in this paper as A\*-C Grade GCSEs, and also first-class honours (1<sup>st</sup>) and second-class honours in the upper division (2:1) degrees. Low-grade educational *Bads* are viewed as qualifications with limited economic value, which in most cases can only be exchanged for low-income, precarious work (Standing, 2011). Educational *Goods* tends to enhance the labour market opportunities of individuals, as they have considerably more economic *use-value* (Marx, 1995 [1867]) than their low-grade academic counterparts. Thus, the educational *Bads* that African Caribbeans have tended to obtain in recent years (Gillborn, 2005) have offered very little in the way of labour market security, or opportunities for upward social class mobility.

Some commentators suggest that the concept of class is no longer capable of measuring the complex social divisions in contemporary capitalist societies (Giddens in Atkinson, 2007; Beck, 2007; 2013). Others contend that the notion has multiple dimensions and class positions should also indicate inter-heterogeneity and cultural dispositions (Waters, 1994; Bottero, 2004; Crow and Pope, 2008; Crompton, 2008; Bourdieu, 2010 [1984]). A social class is operationalised in this paper as 'occupants of the same position in a space [...] corresponding to their [...] material conditions of existence [...] and [...] relationally to other positions, as being above or below them' (Bourdieu, 1987: 6). Nevertheless, it is also acknowledged that what constitutes a social class is indeed multi-faceted. Therefore, the concept of class is expounded here as a conflation of position, situation *and* disposition in the traditions of Marx (1995, [1867]), Weber (in Morrison, 1995) and Bourdieu (2010, [1984]) respectively. Weber's view of a class situation (Weber in Morrison, 1995) may seem in opposition to Marx's perspective of class as a position, as the former 'is indicated by property and market relations' whilst the latter is indicated by 'mobility processes' (Crompton, 2008: 72). However, both concepts enhance Bourdieu's (2010, [1984]) notion

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<sup>6</sup> Weber also contends that market situations are the 'great means by which life-chances are dispensed in a modern urban-industrial society' (Rex and Tomlinson, 1979: 24).

<sup>7</sup> Commodities are articulated here both in the Marxian (1995, [1867]), sense as items of exchange and use-value, and also the Bourdieusian (1979; 2010, [1984]) notion of them being symbolic capital and signifiers of social status.

<sup>8</sup> Curran's (2013) view, that the ascendancy of the market increases the significance of class and the importance of social mobility, is supported here. Moreover, competition in the educational market is expounded as the means by which African Caribbeans can improve their class status.

of class as a disposition, influenced by the accumulation of symbolic and cultural capital<sup>9</sup>. This is particularly as symbolic capital is often accumulated by competing in market situations, and both tend to determine hierarchical social class positions.

Bourdieu's (2010, [1984]) notions of field and habitus are also central to understanding the education sector as a key site of conflict, in which social classes and ethnic groups compete for educational *Goods*. To Bourdieu, the concept of habitus is defined as 'an active residue or segment [...] shaping [...] perception, thought [...] action and [...] molding social practice in a regular way'. The Field, on the other hand, constitutes the various social spaces in which the habitus operates and is also reproduced. It is 'constituted through competitive exchanges of the various resources, or *Goods* that are deemed valuable within them, and their shape is that of the distribution of those *Goods*' (ibid, 2001: 86 [emphasis added]). The educational field is also a hegemonic space in which the middle-classes reproduce their ideological domination over the working-classes. Consequently, disparities in the acquisition of educational *Goods* contribute to class differences in the habitus of social lifestyles and taste<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, Whiteness is performed on the educational stage, which reproduces and legitimates ideas of White supremacy and Black subordination. Educational institutions are spaces of White domination 'in terms of the power of naming, defining, decision making and the use of symbolic and physical violence' against racialised Others (Garner, 2007: 15). The power of Whiteness is ideologically maintained in the education sector by the dominance of an ethnocentric curriculum (Troyna, 1984; 1992), which prioritises European history and culture and also through the use of discriminatory policies and practices that upholds White supremacy (Troyna and Carrington, 1990; Gillborn, 2005). The conflation of ideology and policy in the education sector maintains the 'rhetorical, cultural, political and social mechanism[s], through which "Whiteness" is both invented and used to mask its power and privilege' (Giroux in Gillborn, 2005: 489). Thus, schools and learning institutions are sites of struggle for academic *Goods*, which are forms of symbolic capital used for social mobility.

The *appropriate age-stage*, at which African Caribbeans acquire educational *Goods*, is also crucial to improving their class status. Bourdieu (2010, [1984]: 99) contends that 'age is [...] the key to different modes of access to the position – by qualification or internal promotion – and [...] different chances of access to the educational system'. Thus, GCSEs should be acquired at 16; A-levels at 18, university degrees by 21 – at the earliest – and labour market participation should commence no later than the mid-twenties. *Good* [grade] higher

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<sup>9</sup> Bourdieu (2010, [1984]: 225) defines cultural capital as the taste, items and pursuits which distinguishes the middle-classes from their working-class counterparts.

<sup>10</sup> Weber, like Bourdieu (2010, [1984]) also acknowledges that the struggle for commodities is about status and consumption in which 'members of groups [...] share lifestyle, habits of taste and the pursuit of social esteem' (Morrison, 1995: 239).

educational qualifications, can then be exchanged for *Good* economic capital (ibid, 2010, [1984]); i.e. employment in well-paid occupations. However, if educational *Goods* are not acquired at the *appropriate age-stage* then individuals might enter the labour market too early, without the necessary qualifications to access the high-income professions. It could also be the case that employment might commence at a much later age-stage when individuals are older, and are perceived by employers as having less economic value than their younger counterparts. Thus, the age at which individuals obtain *Goods* in tertiary and further education, prior to participating in H.E., are key determinants of their life-chances and future labour market opportunities. Moreover, labour market participation, without H.E. *Goods*, increases exposure to the risk of long-term poverty and reduces opportunities to improve one's social status. Access to Birmingham's H.E. sector is examined in this paper in the context of a market situation, within which African Caribbean students compete with their ethnic peers for symbolic capital. However, the position taken here is that educational success is neither 'easy or typical' (Weber in Smith, 2007: 87) for Black students. A reason being is that where racism was once acknowledged as a major obstacle to their educational attainment (Troyna, 1984; 1992), its perpetuity is now concealed by the *invisible hand of the market*<sup>11</sup>.

### **African Caribbean pupils: School exclusions in the educational market**

Coard (1971) highlighted the over-representation of Black Caribbean children in schools for the educationally sub-normal (ESN), during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The children of West Indian immigrants made up 75% of the pupil population in ESN schools nationally (ibid, 1971). Data from the Department for Education and Science (DES), also revealed that in January 1971 'of the 5,500 immigrant children in special schools, 70% were of West Indian origin' (McKenley, 2001: 319). Historically and currently, the majority of the UK's Caribbean population tends to be concentrated in Britain's major cities (Peach, 1968; Finney, et al., 2016). Therefore, it could be argued that the majority of pupils, referred to ESN schools in the past, might have originated from London and Birmingham. ESN schools, in their original sense, were abolished following the 1981 Education Act [EA1981] (Tomlinson, 2008). However, merely abolishing such schools did not ameliorate the practice of excluding Black children. During the academic year 1986-1987, the over-representation of Black children excluded from State schools was still evident within the Inner-London Education Authority (ILEA), (Troyna and Carrington, 1990). Prior to the EA1981, Birmingham was the focus of the Commission for Racial Equality's (CRE) investigation into concerns regarding the high number of Black children being excluded from State education, between 1974 and 1980. The CRE's Report concluded that teachers in Birmingham referred a disproportionate number of Black

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<sup>11</sup> This is a phrase attributed to Adam Smith (1723-1790), who is generally considered to be the father of classic liberalism.

children to educational guidance centres or suspension units, which were effectively the institutions that replaced ESN schools (CRE in *ibid*, 1990). The disproportionate exclusion of Black children, in State education, is a phenomenon that has persisted into the twenty-first century.

The only significant change to the pattern of school exclusions in the twenty-first century is the addition of the Mixed White and Black Caribbean ethnic group. This ethnic category was first introduced in the 2001 National Census (Ratcliffe, 2004). Prior to 2001, most Mixed White British and Black Caribbeans were politically and ontologically classified as Black. The DfE (2012a: 4) reveals that in the academic year 2009-2010 'Black Caribbean pupils were nearly four times more likely to receive a permanent exclusion than the school population as a whole'. Moreover, their Mixed White and Black Caribbean peers, were three times more likely to be permanently excluded than White British children (*ibid*, 2012a: 32). There is an undeniable correlation between school exclusions and ethnic disparities in the acquisition of educational *Goods*. Fifty-eight per cent of children from any White background attained five or more A\*-C grade GCSEs in 2010-2011, which is in line with the national average of 58.2% (DfE, 2012b: 3). This compares to 54.3% of children of any Black background. Moreover, only Travellers of the Irish Heritage/Gypsy/Roma ethnic group had a lower GCSE attainment than Black Caribbean children and their Mixed White and Black Caribbean counterparts in the academic year 2010-2011 (*ibid*, 2012b: 4). Ethnic differences in school exclusions and GCSE attainment are important factors of social class mobility, because if *Good* grade educational qualifications are not acquired during secondary school, then the chances of university participation – via further education – at the *appropriate age-stage* are significantly low. Without the requisite H.E. qualifications, access to the high-income occupations that provide more opportunities for social progression is problematic. Opportunities for social class mobility are also constrained by the increased likelihood of early entry into the labour market, or unemployment.

There were 5,740 exclusions in English schools during the academic year 2009-10, of which 28% were girls<sup>12</sup> (DfE, 2012a: 22). Eighty-seven per cent of permanent exclusions occurred in secondary schools (*ibid*, 2012a: 13). Most pupils were excluded in years 9 and 10, when they are aged 13 and 14 respectively (*ibid*, 2012a: 21). School exclusions in this particular phase of children's education can have a detrimental impact on their subsequent social class mobility. This is because it is the *appropriate age-stage* when pupils are being prepared for their GCSE entries. It is also the start of the process where schools compete to obtain their highest possible position in Ofsted's School League Tables. Permanent exclusions occur

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<sup>12</sup> Whilst I acknowledge that there are significant gender differences in educational attainment and exclusion, and that African Caribbean girls generally outperform their male counterparts regardless of their high rate of school exclusion, there is not enough room here to articulate these disparities in any detail.



more frequently during this period and, as noted above, proportionately more Black children are excluded than any other ethnic group. Therefore, it could be argued that some schools might adopt the discriminatory practice of excluding African Caribbean children to enhance the school's position in the A\*-C economy<sup>13</sup>. In the context of competition in the classroom, in which the actions of pupils *and* teachers are regulated by a target culture, Black children might be viewed as high-risk *Bads*. This is particularly as the success of schools, and the competency of teachers, are increasingly measured by the GCSE attainment of pupils. Sivanandan (2013: 3) notes that within the market State 'men and women are consumers, not producers'. As such, teachers might employ the practice of excluding children who they view as *toxic consumers* to maintain their attainment, achievement and retention targets.

Ratcliffe (2004: 79) notes that teachers have been effectively trained to see Black educational failure as normative, to the extent where they might observe the comparatively low GCSE attainment of African Caribbean children and 'not question its existence'. This is similar to the pathological view of Black culture expounded in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s (Coard, 1971; Carby, 1982; Gilroy, 1987 [1992]), which overlooked racism as a causal factor in the achievement of children of Caribbean heritage. Some teachers might view the culture of Black children as being incompatible with the perceived norms of Whiteness, in the educational field, and operating in opposition to the school's habitus. The main cause of Black pupils' fixed period school exclusions is physical assault against another pupil (DfE, 2012a). This accounted for approximately 27 % of their exclusions in comparison to just over 17% for White pupils who committed the same offence. However, persistent and disruptive behaviour is considered to be the most serious cause of permanent exclusions for *all* ethnic groups (ibid, 2012a: 16), and it is the major offence committed by the majority of excluded White pupils. Approximately 25% of White pupils are permanently excluded for persistent and disruptive behaviour, compared to 16% of Black pupils (ibid, 2012a: 18). This shows that in comparison to their White peers, Black pupils are punished disproportionately. They have higher rates of school exclusions than their White counterparts, despite committing offences that are deemed to be less serious.

The existence of institutional racism has long been acknowledged as a social reality by the State, albeit in different contexts: firstly, in the 1985 Swann Report (Mamon, 2004), and much later by Macpherson (1999). However, the persisting problem of racism is now much wider and systematically entrenched in the present educational market than it was in previous years. On May 6<sup>th</sup> 2016, the Government made a political U-turn, after announcing in the 2016 Budget that it intended to impose academisation on all schools within six years (Unison, 2016). The Government subsequently decided to use the DfE as its vehicle 'to

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<sup>13</sup> Gillborn and Youdell (2000); Gillborn's concept of *Rationing* is also referred to by Ratcliffe (2004: 83).

force schools in “underperforming” local authorities to convert to academy status’ (Adams, 2016). Local authorities operating successful schools will be able to decide if academisation is best for them. Moreover, academies and free schools are now being encouraged by the Government to deliver the English Baccalaureate (E. Bacc.), which might eventually replace GCSEs. However, Gillborn (2013: 483) contends that ‘the Government’s own data suggest that Black students do not draw equitable rewards from attending academy schools’.

The DfE (in *ibid*, 2013) reveals that roughly 20 per cent of students take examinations in the subjects required for E. Bacc. entry (English, Maths, two Sciences, a modern/ancient foreign language and a Humanities subject). However, teachers tend to enter pupils who *they consider* to be the most proficient. This has consequences for Black pupils, who as I have argued above tend to be perceived by White middle-class teachers as *toxic consumers*, as African Caribbean children can be subjected to symbolic violence<sup>14</sup> (Bourdieu, 2010 [1984]). This discriminatory practice reinforces the perception that Black pupils are not as intellectually competent as their White counterparts (Coard, 1971; Carby, 1982; Gillborn, 2016). It is in this way that racial discrimination operates insidiously under the pretext of competition in the educational market. The arbitrary E. Bacc. assessment and referral process suggests that academisation can potentially compound the disadvantages experienced by Black pupils in the educational market. As the E. Bacc. qualification provides an entry route into H.E., academies might effectively increase the risk of future poverty for African Caribbean children by denying them the opportunity to obtain university *Goods*. Thus, where the discrimination of Caribbean children was previously driven by individual prejudice and institutional racism (Swann, 1985; Macpherson, 1999), the market must now be acknowledged as an additional factor in their educational disadvantage. The disproportionate rate at which African Caribbean children are being excluded in State schools, compounded with their comparatively low educational attainment, might seem to be consequences of cultural differences and competition – in a system that appears meritocratic. However, the problem is that racial discrimination can no longer be distinguished from selection by assessment and competition between pupils. Racism is now hidden within the vicissitudes of the educational market.

### **African Caribbean students: H.E. participation and risk**

There is a general dearth of data pertaining to African Caribbean students, who participated in H.E. during the previous century. The current statutory duty of learning institutions, to record and monitor information on ethnicity, was implemented by New Labour (Learning Skills Council, 2002) after 1997. The statutory duty of ethnicity monitoring followed the

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<sup>14</sup> In this context, symbolic violence is the denial of educational capital to Black children.

recommendations of the 1999 Macpherson Report which, unlike its Swann (1985) predecessor, emphasised that institutional racism was a major contributory factor in the disadvantages faced by Black children in the British education sector. Nevertheless, merely imposing a duty to monitor and record ethnicity information, does not necessarily mean that educational establishments have to actually *do anything* with the data – vis-à-vis reducing inequalities. Moreover, the focus on eliminating racial discrimination has become even less significant following the passing of the 2010 Equality Act which classifies “race” as one of nine protected characteristics. As a result, racial discrimination is generally perceived to be no more of a barrier to individual life-chances than, for example, protected characteristics such as marriage or pregnancy (HM Government, 2010). The reduced focus on racial inequality has negative implications for the social class mobility of African Caribbean students. This is highlighted below in the context of H.E. participation, and the type of universities that Birmingham’s African Caribbean students attend.

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) lists 162 UK higher education institutions, 24 of which belong to the Russell Group, which are considered to be the *Premier League* universities (Which? University, 2014; Guardian, 2014). Degrees from Russell Group institutions are generally valorised by employers in the professions, more so than those from other universities. Therefore, the recipients of Russell Group *Goods* might have more success in the labour market and greater opportunities to improve their social class status. However, ethnic differences between Birmingham students accessing Russell Group universities reveal that African Caribbeans have a lower rate of participation in comparison to their White British counterparts. Between 2007 and 2013, a total of 117, 623 Black Caribbean, White British, and Mixed White and Black Caribbean<sup>15</sup> students, of all ages residing in Birmingham, have accessed 161 universities nationally. Regardless of ethnic group and age differentials, more females than males participated in H.E generally. In comparison to their White British and Mixed White and Black Caribbean counterparts, African Caribbean female students had the highest proportional representation in H.E. However, Black Caribbean males had the lowest.

Out of the Birmingham students in the three ethnic groups surveyed, between 2007 and 2013, African Caribbeans have the highest overall H.E. proportional representation. Table 1 and Figure 1 below highlight the Russell Group participation of students of all ages. Figure 1 reveals that the proportional representation of White British students in Russell Group institutions is almost three times higher than African Caribbeans and nearly double that of Mixed White and Black Caribbeans. As Russell Group degrees are more valorised by employers than those from other universities, the data indicates that in comparison to their

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<sup>15</sup> The data was obtained by request from HESA.

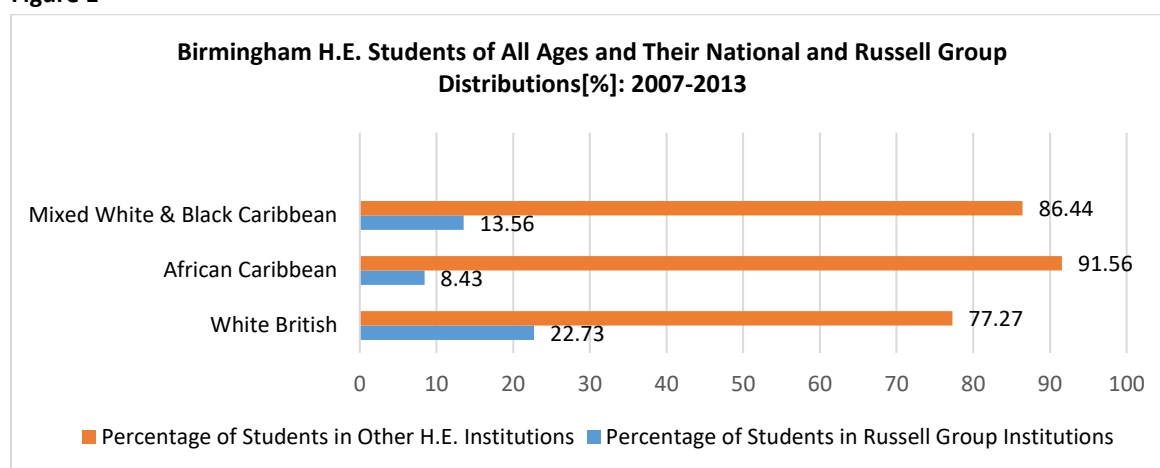
peers African Caribbeans might have more difficulty exchanging their educational *Goods* for economic *Goods*.

**Table 1: Birmingham H.E. Students of All Ages and Their National and Russell Group Distributions: 2007-2013.**

Ethnic Group	H.E. Student Totals	Total in Russell Group Universities	Total in Other Universities
White British	97,684	22,200	75,484
African Caribbean	15,403	1,300	14,103
Mixed White & Black Caribbean	4,536	615	3,921

Source: HESA, (2014).

**Figure 1**



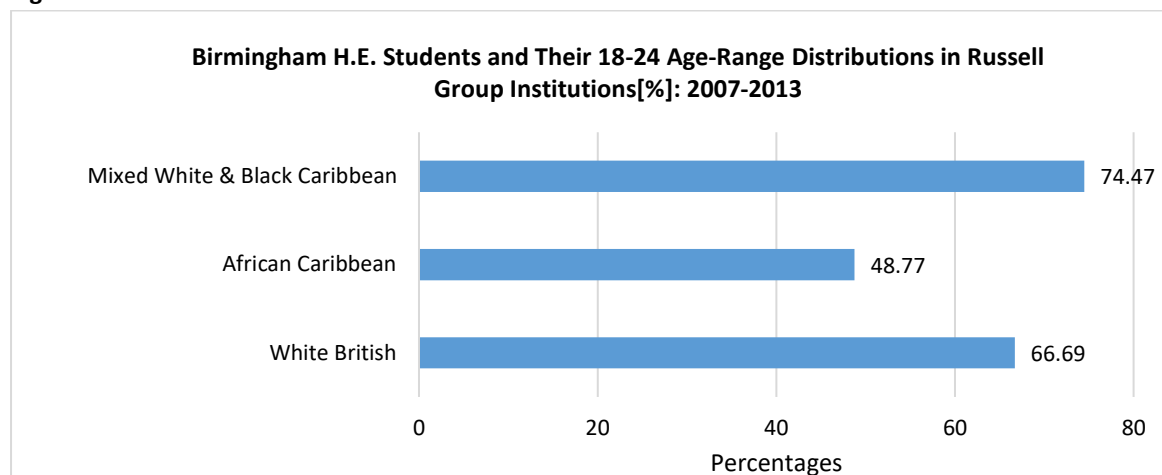
Source: HESA, (2014).

As noted earlier, individuals are generally expected to obtain university degrees by twenty-one at the earliest. The *appropriate age-stage* of expected university participation is 18-24-years-old, and individuals should enter the labour market during their mid-twenties. Figure 2 below reveals that two thirds of 18-24-year-old White British Birmingham students are studying at Russell Group universities, in comparison to less than half of their Black Caribbean peers. African Caribbeans and White Britons have similar proportional representations of 18-24-year-olds in their national and Birmingham Census populations<sup>16</sup>. Thus, the disparity in their 18-24 Russell Group participation increases the risk of employment in relatively low-waged occupations – for young African Caribbeans leaving university. Mixed White and Black Caribbeans have a comparatively smaller and younger population than their White British and African Caribbean peers<sup>17</sup>. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that three quarters of their 18-24 Birmingham student cohort are studying at Russell Group universities.

<sup>16</sup> See CASWEB (2015).

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

Figure 2



Source: HESA, (2014).

It is generally acknowledged that as social actors approach 50 (and the lower one is positioned within the occupational structure), there is the expectancy of diminishing economic returns. Age naturally reduces the duration of an employee’s working life and, in some occupations, limits the prospect of promotion. Consequently, 25-49 is the optimum *age-stage* in which workers are expected to take advantage of labour market opportunities to improve their economic status. Although Table 2 below reveals that White British and Black Caribbean students in Birmingham have similar rates of H.E. participation in the 25-34 age-group, it can also be seen that the gap increases significantly for those aged 35-49. African Caribbeans have over a third more students than their White counterparts in the 35-49 age-group, and nearly three times more than their Mixed White and Black Caribbean peers. This disparity indicates there might be a correlation between older African Caribbean H.E. participation and the disproportionate number of Black children excluded in secondary education (CRE, 1997; DfE, 2012a). Although the DfE (2012a) data is specific to national exclusions, the HESA data in Table 2 is particular to Birmingham. Nevertheless, as argued earlier, pupils in cities such as Birmingham in which African Caribbeans are highly concentrated, would represent a significant amount of the national school exclusion data.

Table 2: Birmingham H.E. Students and Their National Age-Range Distributions: 2007-2013.

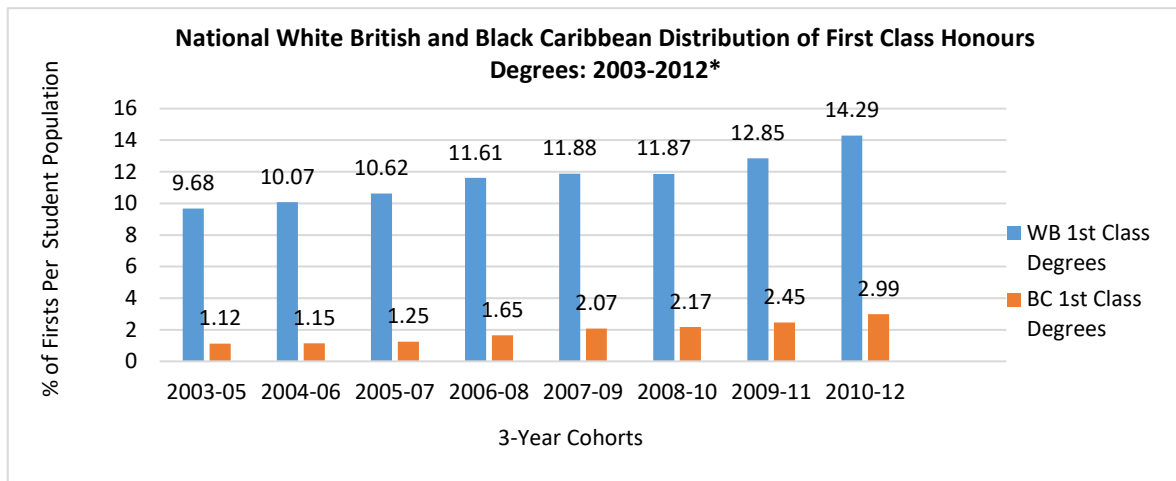
Ethnic Group	All	All	All	All
	Students in H.E. 18-24 [%]	Students in H.E. 25-34 [%]	Students in H.E. 35-49 [%]	Students in H.E. 50+ [%]
White British	55.75	22.54	16.51	5.15
African Caribbean	47.85	22.0	25.35	4.77
White & Black Caribbean	69.97	19.64	9.32	1.05

Source: HESA, (2014).

On the surface, the comparatively lower Russell group participation of African Caribbean students might suggest that their academic abilities are not on par with those of their ethnic

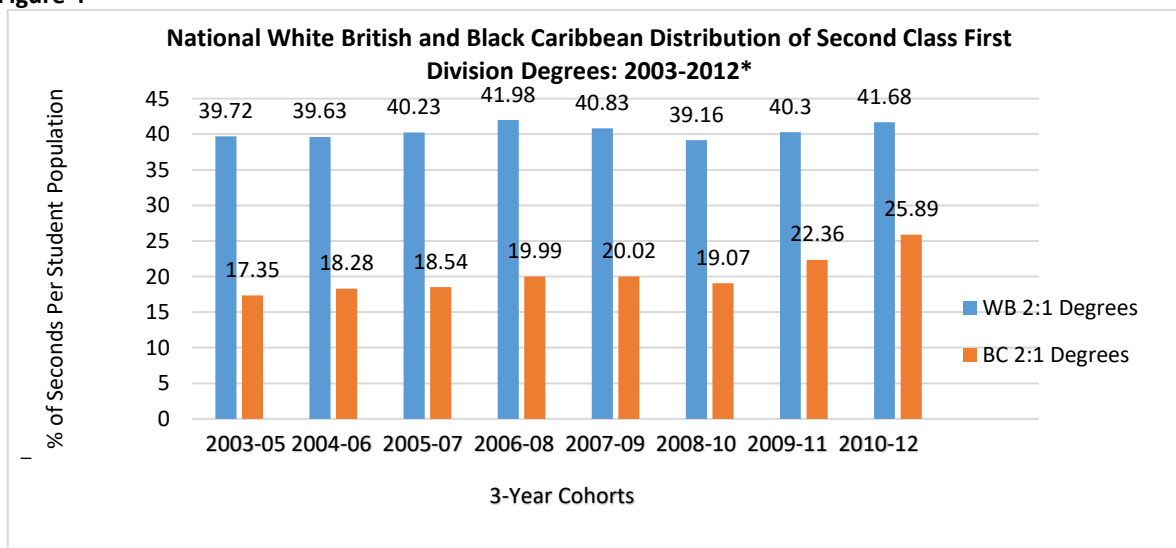
peers. It also implies that they are *naturally* unable to achieve the same level of success in a competitive and meritocratic educational system (see Gillborn, 2016). The data reinforces the notion of Black cultural deficiency, an idea that has persisted since the 1960s when the British Born children of West Indian immigrants first entered the education system (Coard, 1971; Carby, 1982; Rex and Tomlinson, 1979). However, there is evidence to suggest that it is neither culture nor low intellect that holds Black children back, but rather an insidious form of racial discrimination in the educational market. Figures 3 and 4 below provide a heuristic comparison of differences in the national distribution of H.E. *Goods* between White Caribbean and Black Caribbean students. Disparities in the data does not explain why there is such a disproportionate gap in degree outcomes between students accessing university with the same required entry grades.

**Figure 3**



Sources: Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA], (2014); Higher Education Information Database for Institutions [HEIDI], (2014).

**Figure 4**



Sources: Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA], (2014); Higher Education Information Database for Institutions [HEIDI], (2014).

\* Averages based on interpolations from HESA student ethnic group H.E. population data (2014).

Although “race” is a protected characteristic under the 2010 Equality Act (EA2010), racial discrimination continues to be a cause for concern in higher education. Research by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (HEFCE, 2014) reveals that despite achieving the same BBB grades at A-level, there is a great deal of ‘variation in degree outcome for students from different ethnicities’. Overall, 53% of Black<sup>18</sup> students entering university with the same required entry grades as their ethnic counterparts gain a first or upper second Class degree. This is in comparison to 72% of White students (ibid, 2014). Moreover, ‘female students are more likely to achieve an upper second, or higher, than male students with the same prior educational attainment’ (ibid, 2014). Therefore, Figures 3 and 4 suggest that Black females are consistently outperforming their male counterparts in H.E. Moreover, UCAS data reveals that there are more university applications made by Black teenagers than their White counterparts (Coughlan, 2014). Thirty-nine per cent of Black teenagers applied for a university place in comparison to 31% of their White peers (ibid, 2014). However, research by the London School of Economics suggest, ‘ethnic minority candidates were less likely to be offered places than their similarly qualified White counterparts’ (ibid, 2014). This is especially the case where places at Russell Group Universities are concerned (Sellgren, 2014).

Noden, Shiner and Modood (2014) reveal that, in comparison to their White British counterparts, Black Caribbeans received three fewer places per 100 applications at Russell Group universities. This is despite Black students being more likely than their White counterparts to seek admission into the elite universities and less likely to apply to the ‘lower ranking institutions’ (ibid, 2014: 3). On average 71% of applications made by White applicants result in the offer of a place. Shiner (in Sellgren, 2014) acknowledges that even when age and A-level grades are taken into account the ‘chances of receiving an offer varies, according to [...] ethnicity, [...] type of school [...] and family background’. Consequently, in comparison to their White peers, more Black students have to depend on the UCAS clearing process to enter the elite universities rather than relying on straightforward admissions (Noden, Shiner and Modood, 2014: 1). The above reveals how discriminatory practices are embedded in the selection processes of some higher education institutions. However, it might be an oversight to attribute their existence solely to racism. It should not be overlooked that the H.E. sector is a fiercely competitive market, in which both racial *and* class inequalities are reproduced. Thus, the social class of applicants might also be a clandestine factor when universities are sifting and sorting through student applications. Noden, Shiner and Modood (2014: 7) reveal, ‘candidates from lower social class groups were less likely to receive offers than their more privileged counterparts’. Moreover, Kiely (2014)

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<sup>18</sup> It must be noted here that the HEFCE is referring to data that conflates all Black ethnic groups into a single category.

notes that '75% of Britain's minority communities live in 88 of Britain's poorest wards' and African Caribbeans often live in 'inner-city areas characterised by poverty and high unemployment' (Rhamie and Hallam, 2010: 166). As such, they might be subject to both racial *and* class discrimination in H.E. admission processes.

The social class status of African Caribbean students, and their comparatively high rates of unemployment (Finney et al., 2016) might also be perceived as risks to the targets of elite H.E. institutions. The success rates of universities are documented in league tables, in a similar way to schools. Universities are also assessed by value-added measures, such as how many students find employment after completing their degree. To H.E. institutions, students are effectively commodities in transition: moving from the education market to the labour market. The role of universities is to provide the labour market with workers who have the requisite skills to enhance various sectors of the economy. However, nationally and also in Birmingham, Black unemployment in the 16-74 age-range is double that of Whites in the same age group<sup>19</sup>. Consequently, university lecturers might view African Caribbean students as being unworthy of their time and attention, particularly in a climate of increasing austerity. The elite H.E. institutions might view African Caribbean students as *toxic commodities*: high-risk *Bads*, particularly because of the general difficulties they have gaining employment (Mason, 2000; Heath and Cheung, 2007; Finney et al., 2016). Thus, constraining the intake of Black working-class applicants might be a strategy employed by the elite universities to reduce the risk of a low league table position, which would almost certainly reduce their capacity to attract the more affluent middle-class students, who are usually White.

In the academic year 2011-12, State austerity measures influenced universities to adopt the policy of increasing student fees from approximately £3,000 to £9,000 (Universities UK, 2013: 26). The hike in university tuition fees has contributed toward the disadvantages faced by Black undergraduates by increasing their exposure to the risk of debt. Kiely, (2014) notes that 'Black and female graduates [...] take longer to pay off their student debts, due to persistent discrimination in employment'. Moreover, new Government proposals to privatise student loans would more than double the current interest rate on university fees (ibid, 2014). If the policy of shifting university debt from the State to the market is implemented, 'Black students could become even more excluded from higher education' (ibid, 2014). Although H.E. participation is about rationalising risk, the immediate gains of a university degree might be offset by the burden of future debt and poverty. Moreover, the new Higher Education Bill (HEB) (HM Treasury, 2015; Department for Business Innovation and Skills [BIS], 2016a; 2016b) will increase the risk of poverty for working-class students.

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<sup>19</sup> This data is available from the National Census (ONS, 2011).



From the academic year 2017-2018 universities will be allowed 'to raise tuition fees in line with inflation [...] if they can demonstrate good teaching through the teaching excellence framework' (TEF) (Grove, 2016). Universities are currently ranked within the research excellence framework (REF), which positions them according to the research conducted by their academic staff. However, once the HEB is passed, only universities that meet the new teaching and learning standards will be allowed to raise their tuition fees. This latest competitive phase between universities has serious implications for African Caribbean H.E. students, particularly those who are viewed by the elite institutions as *toxic commodities*. Teaching will be assessed as part of the criteria for funding, which consequently means that student grades will be of major concern. Thus, as competition for students, State funding and private sector investment increases, so too will racism within the educational market. However, it will be even more difficult to detect than it currently is.

## Conclusion

It seems that 'the more things change the more they remain the same' (Mirza, 2007: 1). Despite major political changes, since the passing of the ERA1988, racial discrimination continues to be a major barrier in the educational experiences of African Caribbean pupils and students. However, the factor that now differentiates the current educational experiences of African Caribbeans, from those of their predecessors, is the way in which the free market has replaced State intervention as the *supposed* mediator of fairness in the education sector. Although "race" is a protected characteristic under the EA2010, teachers in State schools and universities continue to discriminate against Black students who they arbitrarily view as high-risk *Bads*. Notions of cultural differences, which was formerly used to account for Black educational failure in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s (Coard, 1971; Carby, 1982; Gilroy, 1992 [1987]), are now reified by competition within the educational market. However, marketisation policies overlook the factors that continue to disadvantage African Caribbean pupils and students, such as individual and institutional racism, and material inequalities. In the contemporary educational market, the intersectionality of class and "race" informs the ways in which schools and universities discriminate to manage risk.

The situation of Birmingham's African Caribbean H.E. students is to a great extent indicative of the national picture of Black educational disadvantage. Although the majority of them are entering universities at the appropriate 18-24 age-stage, a significant number of Black H.E. students are in the 34-49 age group. This could be a legacy of the disproportionate number of African Caribbean children permanently excluded from State education during the 1980s. Age is problematic for the social class mobility of older students, because they have less economic value to employers than their younger counterparts. This suggests that merely participating in H.E. does not necessarily reduce the risk of poverty. What is also

problematic for Birmingham's Black Caribbean students, in regard to reducing the risk of poverty, is their comparatively low rates of access to the elite universities. Although discrimination plays a part in the application process (Noden, Shiner and Modood, 2014), age, "race" and class intersect to disadvantage Black students in the H.E. market. This intersectionality erects barriers to their social class mobility by reducing post-university labour market opportunities. The material deprivation of the working-class environments of Caribbean children, along with racist practices in secondary education, are also major barriers to their university participation. Obtaining a university education, with the certainty of debt and the uncertainty of employment, can ameliorate the risk of future poverty. However, social class mobility is not *easy and typical* for African Caribbeans, as the education sector is far from meritocratic. This paper highlights that managing the risk of poverty is not a simple matter of acquiring and exchanging educational *Goods* for economic capital (Bourdieu, 2010 [1984]) where Black pupils and students are concerned.

Racial discrimination in universities has recently been acknowledged by the former Prime Minister. David Cameron suggested imposing a 'transparency duty [with the aim of] tearing down the barriers at elite universities' (Gov. UK, 2016). Shiner and Noden (2014: 3) also note that 'more needs to be done to improve access, particularly to the most selective institutions'<sup>20</sup>. However, the Prime Minister's statement overlooks how discriminatory practices in the secondary education sector reduce the likelihood of university participation for Black Caribbean children. This is particularly the case where Russell Group applications are concerned. GCSEs at Grade C or higher must first be acquired, in order to obtain the various A-level and Level 3 qualifications that are needed to enter universities at the *appropriate age-stage*. Therefore, it is not *just* the exclusionary practices of universities that are barriers to the H.E. participation of African Caribbean students, but also the disproportionate rate at which Black children are permanently excluded prior to commencing their GCSEs (DfE, 2012a). Therefore, it is not *new* legislation that is required, but rather the political will to sanction institutions that transgress their statutory duties under the *existing* equality agenda. Imposing substantial fines on educational establishments, that discriminate against Black Caribbean pupils, applicants and students, is a means by which the market could be appropriated to reduce inequalities and mediate fairness in the education sector.

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<sup>20</sup> See also Grove (2015).

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