

# Sociological explanations for ethnic differences in educational success

[Education](#)



There are many reasons for educational underachievement and it has been said that ethnicity is one of these key factors. It has been found that Indian and Asian pupils are of higher educational achievement than White, African-Caribbean, and Black, Pakistani and Bangladeshi pupils. One possible cause of ethnic differences in education could be at the fault of the education system.

To investigate this Sewell conducted a study using semi-structured interviews and observations in an inner-city boys' comprehensive school, his study revealed the ways in which African-Caribbean students are labelled by their teachers, peers, white students as 'problems' in the classroom. Sewell showed how Black boys use these negative perceptions to construct different responses to school based on their own 'masculine' images, many of these belonging to the anti-school culture, such as conformists, innovators, rebels and retreatists, all in favour of gang culture.

However some sociologists are critical of this study in that they feel Sewell is blaming 'black-culture' for the educational failure as opposed to recognising racism within the education system. Another reason for ethnic differences in achievement lies in the school itself. Sociologist Connolly found that teachers are more likely to be overly critical of African-Caribbean pupil's behaviour due to stereotypical views of their ethnic ways resulting in them being labelled as troublemakers and being in need of stricter discipline.

This can therefore lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy of the student whereby they become troublesome in a 'screw-you' effect to their teachers. However, as criticism to this Sewell found evidence that not every pupil responded with the self-fulfilling prophecy, and in fact some African-Caribbean students

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adopted 'White' values and behaviours at the expense of losing their African-Caribbean stereotypical identities.

There are clearly definite suggestions as to why certain ethnic groups are underachieving in the education system; however they are reasons as to why some ethnic groups are performing better than others. For example, the home of a pupil is a primary agent in their socialisation and education and this therefore has the biggest impact on the pupil so when at school they will either be handicapped or at an advantage from their upbringing.

For example, Modood argued that some ethnic minorities have higher levels of cultural capital, despite often being from a working-class background. Many Indians and Asians originate from working-class backgrounds even though they end up with middle class jobs. These parents therefore place particularly high values on educational success and contain the knowledge and understanding of education to motivate their children and help them to succeed.

Strand also investigates ethnicity and achievement in education, he compared the progress of Indian, African-Caribbean and white British pupils in their secondary education. Strand found that Indian children made more positive progress than the white British students but African-Caribbean pupils fell even further behind. Strand found the Indian's success was due to both material and cultural factors such as high aspirations and dedication to homework, low levels of truancy and exclusion and good resources at home such as computers and private tutoring.

However there was no evidence that African-Caribbean parents and pupils adopted a culture that would hold them back in their educational success, they had high aspirations and a positive attitude to school. Overall his research found little, if any, difference in the cultural support for education between working-class white and African-Caribbean pupils and so, although there were valid reasons found for the Indian pupils' success, it was difficult to explain why African-Caribbean pupils were doing less well.

These are, in my opinion the most important factors affecting ethnic differences in educational achievement and although Strand's research did not come to a clear conclusion as to why African-Caribbean pupils are underachieving it is clear to see that negative stereotypes and material/cultural deprivation are the reasons for their underachievement and the positive labelling and encouragement from parents' cultural capital is what gives Indian and Asian children an advantage and therefore contributes to their educational success.