



The Secret Life of Social Class

Race, Culture and the Perils of Black Students' Achievement in London and New York City Schools

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Core Claims in my Research Programme

- **We limit the depth of our class analyses when we ignore race as an enduring social force.**
- We limit the depth of our racial analyses when we ignore class as an enduring social force.

Overview

- 1) Measurements of Social Class in Society
- 2) Meanings of Social Class in Schools

1. Measurements of Social Class

THE MIDDLE CLASSES

I classify Black youth in London and New York as middle class if:

- (1) their parents self-identified as such
- (2) the pupils indicated their family's middle class standing based on degree attainment (from BA to terminal degrees), home ownership, and professional occupation (e.g. NS-SEC 1 and 2).

THE WORKING CLASSES

I classify Black youth in London and New York as working class if:

- (1) their parents self-identified as such
- (2) the pupils indicated their family's working class standing based on professional occupation, levels of educational attainment, and housing arrangements

Key Cross-National Class Indicator

Across national contexts, I emphasize levels of *educational attainment*, as opposed to annual earnings, to underscore the linkages between education and upward social mobility.

2. Meanings of Social Class

Methodology

Ethnography

16 months of school-wide
ethnographic observations,
Over 500 hours of classroom
Observation

Interviews

184 interviews

50 focus group interviews with
second-generation Black
Caribbean students

Data & Reports

School records,
newsletters,
press releases and
news articles

134 one-on-one, in-depth
interviews

60 with students,
40 with parents,
16 with teachers,
and 18 with school
administrators



Key Findings

In the quest to identify successful Black students, teachers in London and New York City comprehensive schools:

- **praise Black middle class students as models for Black pupils with high ability**, all while ignoring the class resources that enable their success and
- **promote a sense of panic among Black working class pupils as lacking in ability.**

The Secret Life of Social Class

In the quest to identify successful Black students, teachers in London and New York City comprehensive schools:

- Selective praise of specific Black middle class pupils for collective grooming of the Black Caribbean working classes.
- Racial motivation through elision of class.
- **Race and culture are emphasized, while class is strategically erased.**

The Politics of the Class Cover-Up

The secret life of social class is nestled in wider politics of covering class in an 'aspiration nation' and the 'American Dream'.

- Praise Black Caribbean middle class pupils should not at all suggest that Black Caribbean middle class pupils are somehow better than their working class peers by virtue of their class status.
- Promotion of the Black middle-class pupils is about the fact that they often deploy dominant social, cultural and economic capital that teachers recognize and reward.
- **Praise of the Black middle classes as model for their working class peers is fundamentally about the fact that schools are middle class institutions that reward middle class pupils with praise, prestige and power—just as Bourdieu suggested.**

Core Claims in my Research Programme

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- **We limit the depth of our racial analyses when we ignore class as an enduring social force.**



This strategy of highlighting ‘ethnic and class picks’ among Black students is, in practice, a racial trick



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The *Culture* Trap

*Ethnic Expectations and Unequal
Schooling for Black Youth*

DERRON WALLACE

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DIANE REAY, PROFESSOR OF EDUCATION, UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Thank You!

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