

# The Educational Strategies of the Black Middle Classes

## Project Summary

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## **Acknowledgements**

We would like to express our appreciation to the parents who so generously agreed to be interviewed for this study. We are also grateful to our Advisory Group for their time and contributions:

Sir Keith Ajegbo

Kwame Kwei Armah

Professor Ann Phoenix

Dr Debbie Weekes-Barnard

Finally, we would like to thank the Economic & Social Research Council<sup>1</sup> for the award of a grant to support this research.

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Cover photograph by Philip Meech

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<sup>1</sup> ESRC RES-062-23-1880

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## The Educational Strategies of the Black Middle Classes

### Key Findings

- **Concerned and actively involved in education**

Black middle class parents prioritise education and are actively involved in their children's schooling.

They use a range of strategies, including their class resources (e.g. accessing professional networks, carrying out detailed research, initiating meetings with teachers & tutors) to support their children through the education system.

- **Discomfort with the label 'middle class'**

The term 'middle class' tends to provoke discomfort amongst Black middle class parents. They often prefer to identify themselves as 'professional', rather than 'middle class'.

- **Black middle classes and racism**

Racism is a reality in the lives of Black middle class families. Parents recognise it as less overt than when they were children but nonetheless pervasive in more subtle and coded forms affecting both them and their children.

Black middle class parents are vigilant and work to protect their children from incidents of racism at school.

- **White society's denial of racism**

The Black middle classes seldom make explicit mention of racism as a barrier to their children's educational success, even if there is evidence for it. Experience tells them that the term 'racism' is likely to be met with resistance and antagonism by teachers, tutors and school staff.

- **Aspirations for Black middle class children**

Educational achievement is seen as a key means of both supporting their children to be socially mobile and, it is hoped, of acting as a possible barrier against racism in their children's future.

# The Educational Strategies of the Black Middle Classes

## Research design

Over a two-year period (June 2009-June 2011) we spoke with 62 parents of Black Caribbean heritage. All had children between the ages of 8 and 18 (an age range that spans key decision-making points in the English education system). Thirteen fathers were included in our sample. We re-interviewed 15 parents, giving us a total of 77 in-depth interviews.

Our interviews included questions about their experiences of the education system, their aspirations for their children's futures and how their experiences are shaped by race and social class.

All the parents were in professional or managerial jobs; that is their occupations were within the top two categories of the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) – the eight point scale used to measure class location in UK social science. They live mainly in London and the south-east, but we also included parents from elsewhere across England. Parents volunteered to speak with us, responding to adverts that we placed in professional publications.

The Economic and Social Research Council funded the research.

## Key Findings

### 1 Agency in educational settings

**Black middle class parents in the study actively seek to use class resources to support their children as they navigate the education system.**

1. The Black middle class parents in the study are resourceful, agentic and resilient. They make use of a range of cultural, social and economic resources to monitor carefully their children's progress through the education system and the actions of their children's teachers, to intervene as and when they deem necessary.
2. This monitoring includes careful consideration of the child's educational career at different stages and, in many cases, considerable long term planning. Once the child is at a school, parents seek to establish a dialogue of equals - a conversation - with the school staff.
3. The Black middle class parents in the study are also active in support of their children's education outside school. They draw on their social

networks, often with other Black middle class professionals, in order to provide children with positive representations of Black people, and obtain practical help and advice.

A range of extra-curricular activities / tutoring are standard. Activities include the traditional staples of music, sport, dance and drama, as well as, in some cases, involvement in Black mentoring and youth organisations (e.g. Junior Windsor Fellowship, 100 Black Men).

4. The Black middle classes and the White middle classes share some similar strategies with regard to education. However, awareness and experience of low teacher expectations, stereotyping and racism in the labour market mean that the Black middle classes have a different orientation to schooling to their White middle class counterparts. This orientation informs their careful monitoring of their children's progress through school.

Speaking broadly, White middle class parents often presume an entitlement, both to a good education for their children and to educational success. Black middle class parents are there to protect their children and insist on high standards. Their own negative experiences of school, the labour market and wider society on account of their race means that they recognise that they do not have the same security of entitlement as their White counterparts.

## 2 White society and racism

**Parents in the study recognise racism as less overt than when they were children but nonetheless pervasive in more subtle, coded forms that White people often do not see or understand.**

1. The Black middle class parents in our study challenge common stereotypes about Black people in British society as being unsuccessful, uninterested in education, and lacking in ambition.
2. Black middle class parents with whom we spoke often find it necessary to actively demonstrate their knowledge about education, their interest and their capability as parents to White teachers and other school staff in order that they be engaged with as equals.
3. In their interactions with teachers the parents seldom name racism as a barrier to their children's educational success. This is because they are aware of the resistance and antagonism that the term is likely to provoke in White power-holders. Instead they develop and employ a range of strategies (see *Educational Strategies* theme) to mediate racism and to protect their children's well being.
4. In mainly White spaces, for example, in meetings with school tutors, governors meetings and social events, race (alongside other factors)

frequently becomes a key feature of interactions, although it is often subtle and unnamed.

Black middle class parents often have to justify their knowledge or experience and find creative ways of being taken seriously by White counterparts (see *Class Resources and Racism* theme).

### 3 Relationship between race, class and identity

**While many of our Black middle class parents speak positively about a Black cultural identity, they tend to be uncomfortable with the label 'middle class', preferring to identify themselves instead as 'professional'.**

1. Many of the participants reflect a pride in their Black identity or culture based on their Caribbean background, alongside aspects of their British identity.
2. Many parents work to promote self-esteem and an emotionally healthy Black identity in their children. This is seen as especially important given the prevalence of negative images of Black people in the media.
3. Many of the Black middle class parents in the study are hesitant about and resist the label 'middle class'. The reasons for this are complex but include:
  - i) The proximity of a working class background (through parents, extended family, friends) in their lives.
  - ii) They associate certain values and preferences (e.g. an automatic sense of privilege, individualism) with the White middle classes. These are values with which they, being Black and middle class, do not wish to be associated.
  - iii) Acknowledgement that despite their shared class status, they are not easily accepted as middle class equals by their White counterparts.
  - iv) Awareness that racism continues to restrict their progress despite their class status.
  - v) The relative newness and small size of the Black middle classes in the UK.
4. Race and social class (and gender) interact in different ways depending on the context. Generally the participants feel that 'race will always trump class' (mother), but that their and their children's growing command of class resources goes *some* way to protect them from – although not entirely avoid - racist stereotyping.



## Summary

The Black middle class parents in the study are able to make use of aspects of their class advantage to mediate the effects of racism. However, their social class does not eradicate the consequences of racism altogether; we still live in a society marred by inequalities of race.

Our findings highlight the continued experiences of low expectations of teachers and the extra labour required of the Black middle classes to get taken seriously by White teachers and school staff. Even in the light of these challenges, many of our respondents' children achieved top grades at GCSE and A-level, going on to secure places at respected universities. However, our findings reveal some of the difficulties they face on the way and may help explain why Black pupils from advantaged backgrounds do not do as well educationally as their White advantaged counterparts.

## Major Project Themes

Over the next few pages, we summarise some of the major themes in our analysis:

- teacher expectations
- parents' educational strategies
- social mix
- class resources and racism
- perceptions of being 'middle class'

### A Word on Theory

Our analysis seeks to pay attention to the *intersections* of social class and race in the respondents' lives. We argue that that asking whether class *or* race is more influential in shaping parents' educational strategies is not as productive as an *intersectional* approach. Such an approach focuses on illuminating the ways in which for different Black middle class parents, at different points in time, and in different interactions, race, class and/or gender can come to the fore.

Particular bodies of theory that we have found useful include Bourdieu's work on habitus and capital, and Critical Race Theory. For more details, please see the full version of our papers.

## Themes

### Teacher expectations

#### Context

Previous research on the experiences of Black Caribbean students has highlighted their disproportionate representation in exclusions from school and in low ranked teaching groups (streams, bands and sets). These patterns have been repeated in both quantitative and qualitative research and by a range of different authors, from activist groups to government sponsored reports (Blair 2001, Gillborn 2008, Gillborn & Mirza 2000, John 2006, Richardson 2007, Rollock 2007).

These persistent inequities point to the continued existence of institutional racism in the English school system. There is, therefore, an urgent need for a greater *intersectional* awareness of how race and class inequalities operate relationally in contemporary education; race inequality is not explicable in simple class terms and a focus on socio-economic differences alone is insufficient. Many commentators would assume that the class advantages of

Black middle class parents would stand them in good stead but our research data point to a more complex picture of deep rooted and persistent race inequality.

### Findings

... the school was running a gifted and talented programme (...) they selected the young people who they saw as gifted and talented to be a part of this programme and started to do things with them, extended their experiences and opportunities and, as I say, I found out about it by default... (...) so they chose these young people and do you know what? All of them were White. (Malorie, education manager, local authority)

Our respondents' experiences point to the continued salience of institutional racism as a central part of their interactions with education. Several respondents recount their own experiences as children who faced a wall of low teacher expectations, sometimes encountering particular hostility from one or more teachers. Some point to the significance of an individual teacher who 'saw something in me' and acted as a key source of support and guidance alongside the essential encouragement, belief and safety provided by their own parents. Having generally been able to succeed despite their experiences of race inequity, the respondents now approach education with care. Like their White middle class peers in previous research (Reay et al 2011, Vincent & Ball 2006, Ball 2003) our interviewees demonstrate high expectations for their children, but describe continuing problems with generally low teacher expectations and a sense that good behaviour and average attainments by Black students are accepted as sufficient by too many teachers.

... in the final year the expectations from some of his teachers, you picked up that they said 'Well you got a pass, so what more do you want? Where we weren't expecting you to get a pass.' (...) [Eventually] he got a mixture of A stars, As, I think his lowest grade was a B for sociology. (Vanessa, community development officer)

Our respondents report that the processes and dangers are magnified in the case of Black young men, who are especially likely to be viewed as a potential threat to good order and can quickly find themselves subject to rapid and escalating disciplinary procedures.

there was a test [son] did and I think he got five out of 35 and this was accepted and as I was looking through the exercise book, I thought what is this? (...) that's just not acceptable and I wanted to know why wasn't I called in, why wasn't I briefed? Why is this just the norm?

(Cynthia, teacher)

## Educational Strategies

We are interested in identifying the strategies used by Black middle class parents to shape and manage their relationship with their children's schools in order to achieve the best educational outcomes for their children. In addition, we identified some subtle variations in the level of involvement across our sample of participants and considered what might account for any differences. We have identified the following clusters of parents, indicating the scope and intensity of their engagement with the school.

### Findings

Determined to get the best: Parental behaviours and strategies include: long term planning of child's educational career, intense focus on academic achievement, monitoring and surveillance of both child and school, and considerable involvement in extra curricula activities and tutoring.

Before he started at the [new, state] school I wrote to the headmaster ...my child is coming to your school, he's always gone to private school, but I love your school, but be warned I have very high expectations of my child, so my message is do not mess up! (Michael, Health consultant)

Watchful and circumspect: Parental behaviours and strategies include: monitoring the child's progress, but lacking the intense focus of the *determined* cluster. Parents take the initiative with schools in setting up a dialogue. They remains within the limited boundaries of what the school judges to be 'appropriate' parental involvement.

I've probably been down to school twice now just to check on him (...) The teachers have been very, very supportive, but also very surprised that I've wanted to see them before parents' evening or before they asked me to (Anne, LA education adviser)

A fighting chance: Parental behaviours and strategies include: Stepping outside the boundaries of school-defined 'appropriate' parental involvement by challenging the school directly, sometimes in connection with own child, but often wider issues to do with inequality. Race and racism often named explicitly by parents in this cluster.

I wrote some very stropy letters to the school.... I am getting the impression that there are a particular set of girls who all seem to be girls of colour who are not treated the same way as others, and I asked the headmistress to look into it, and that teacher left shortly after (Juliet, civil servant)

Hoping for the best: Parental behaviour and strategies include: understanding academic achievement as important, but family priorities give considerable space to the child's own voice. The parents are pro-active with regard to education, and the child's achievement and well-being, but less focused on school and schooling.

I want him to get his grades, I want him to pass, but, I just don't think, I don't want him to be all, it's got to be all As. You know just get some decent grades and then move to the next, the next step (Anita, lecturer)

Clusterings on the continuum are not fixed. One example of forced movement was of a *determined for the best* mother whose child experienced overt and crude racism from peers at his private school. The school was unresponsive to the situation and, fearing for the child's well-being, his mother took him out of the school, and tempers her ambitions for him, *hoping for the best*. Despite her possession of plentiful middle class cultural, social and economic capital, the school's senior management refused to give her complaints any legitimacy, only becoming more entrenched in their position when she explicitly named racism as the cause of her son's problems.

Education is regarded by our respondents as a key site offering opportunities for social mobility, class reproduction and a hope of being better able to protect against racism. However, their experience and awareness of seemingly entrenched low expectations of Black children make the education system a high-risk site, and therefore one that is paramount for parents to try to manage and monitor.

The four clusters reflect subtle differences in:

1 family 'habitus' which generates priorities with regard to their children's upbringing, the conscious and unconscious priorities they give their children about those priorities and the role education plays in that process.

2 parents' possession and activation of social, economic and cultural capitals.

Full paper:

Vincent, C. & Ball, S. (under review) Being strategic, being watchful, being determined: Black middle class parents and schooling.

...education is too important to leave to the teachers alone, but they do have expertise and you have got to respect that. So you keep a sort of watchful eye on what's going on, but you've got to work with them [...] You have to be careful of your language and be very circumspect in how you challenge people in authority.

(Ella, senior health professional)

## Social mix

Social mix in school and friendships are social fields of contestation regarding Black identity and community – what does it mean to be Black, to be middle class, to be Black *and* middle class. These are points of intersectionality.

### School Choice:

Parents choose schools and view their children's' friendship in relation to social mix – although this is not always the only or most important criterion. In terms of schools, respondents are divided between two courses of action. On one hand, there is the privileging of 'good' mixes and issues of principle (favouring local community schools for example), and on the other, the acceptance of an absence of mix in favour of perceived opportunities for educational achievement and advantage, often in the private sector. There are trade-offs and risks on each side, in relation to school choice and ethnic and social mix. In the former there is a risk of low expectations and low standards, in the latter there are risks of social isolation and heightened institutional and interpersonal racisms. There are different versions of a 'good education' here, one defined in fairly narrow academic terms and one, which involves a more extensive form of social learning, a preparation for life, for society, for coping with the diversity of the modern social world.

'Good' social mixes at school, that is ethnic diversity, can serve, as most parents see it, to minimise the likelihood of the experience of racism, create learning environments conducive to academic achievement, and which reinforce ethnic identity, encourage and teach tolerance and develop skills and dispositions for coping with ethnic 'others', and are ways of avoiding 'bad influences'. As far as schooling is concerned such 'good' mixes are far easier to find in London than elsewhere.

### Friendships:

In terms of friendships, many of the parents fear that their children, particularly boys, will fall into 'bad company' if social mixing is not monitored and managed, both at school and on 'the street'. This begins to make clear the families' views of a 'respectable' Blackness, a particular middle class Blackness, set over and against what one parent calls 'stereotypical Black'. This can sometimes lead to tensions between children and parents, and is certainly discussed within the families. Different Black identities are in competition and struggle here, in relation to social class. Moore (2008) has reported similar struggles in the US, although important aspects of the UK context are clearly different. An awareness of mix is a means of seeking out 'others like us' and avoiding 'others' 'not like us'; although a minority of parents see this seeking out and avoidance as pretentious and 'inauthentic'. 'Good' mixes for most of the parents we interviewed involve ethnic rather than social (class) diversity, that is, those of other ethnicities but of the same social class background.

Parents are attuned to their children's friendships, but are aware of the limits of control. Nonetheless, efforts are made to ensure that children choose the 'right' friends – those who are like them in terms of values, aspirations,

demeanor, speech and language and ‘grooming’ as Moore calls it – White middle class parents evinced the same concerns but inflected differently in terms of the relations between ethnicity and class (Ball et al., 2004). A few parents are ambivalent about the ethnic mixing of their children and this can also lead to discussions within families about the importance of a positive Black identity. But clearly the sorts of ethnic identities being constructed by and for these children are different in many ways from those of their parents. There are some indications that this leads to differences between parents and children in the ways that they view race relations and racism, although these children have as yet a limited experience of life in ‘Whiteworld’ (Gillborn 2008:162 ) on which to draw.

Full paper:

Ball, S., Rollock, N., Vincent, C. & Gillborn, D. (under review) *Social Mix, Schooling and Intersectionality: identity and risk for Black middle class families.*

...those same Black students, their values, their behaviour whatever, was slightly different to theirs. So if you are not friends with those groups of girls, who are you going to be friends with? Are your friends going to be White middle class children or Black students who may not be middle class  
(Anthea, Education Manager, Local Authority)

So, yeah we chose that school on the basis of the location. The kind of feel of the place as I say, you know, what the tutors were like, and what the other kids seemed like, they had kids guiding us around this school, the kind of look of the place as in the space and layout, all of these things I took into consideration and yeah, very much a mix ‘cos some of the other schools we went to (...) were quite heavily Asian and I didn’t, you know, I didn’t want that but neither did I want it to be heavily White, I wanted it mixed. I wanted my dream [laughs]; a melting pot school.

(Amanda, Senior Librarian)

## Class resources and racism

One area of our analysis examines how middle class Black adults negotiate survival in a society marked by race and class discrimination. It considers respondents' school experiences, marked as they are by incidents of 'othering' and racism and explores both the processes by which they came to an awareness of their status as racially minoritised and how they made sense of and managed such incidents.

The majority of our respondents have made the transition from working class to middle class during their lifetimes. We argue that formative experiences of racism, the continued experience of racism into their adult lives *and* this class transition have facilitated the development of a complex set of capitals upon which middle class Black adults are able to draw in order to signal their class identity to White others thereby minimising the probability of racial discrimination.

Specifically we note how our parents make use of markers such as vocabulary - the "language of Whiteness" as one participant describes it – accent, comportment and dress in order to both signal their difference from their Black working class counterparts and gain temporary access to and legitimacy within mainly White spaces. One of our participants, Cassandra, describes the strategies she uses to work situations to her advantage:

I don't necessarily sound like a Black person...[when I go into a shop with a complaint] they might try to fob me off and I insist to speak to the manager and you can very quickly see the realisation that I am actually not perhaps just dealing with somebody that does not know how to handle themselves. (...) And so I find that when the manager will come out and I am speaking and it is not raising my voice but it is just about putting my point across that usually I will get what I want. (...) I think that sometimes people categorise you, they expect you to be whatever stereotypical kind of screeching not able to be articulate, you know, Black female (...).

(Cassandra, Director of Training Company)

Our findings mirror those of Lacy's (2007) study of African American middle classes in Washington DC who make use of a similar range of public identities.

With respect to our data we argue, therefore, that the Black middle classes are able to make use of their class position to moderate - albeit not always with guaranteed success - experiences of racial discrimination. However, their experiences reveal that despite the relative advantages of their class position, racism continues to be a considerable threat and concern for this group.



Full paper:

Rollock, N., Gillborn, D., Vincent, C. & Ball, S. (forthcoming) The Public Identities of the Black middle classes: Managing race in public spaces, *Sociology*

Racism is an academic thing for a White person for the most part, whereas it is lived thing for a Black person...

(Robert, Academic)

And you find it helpful sometimes to use your status, what job you do. And people treat you differently. I don't necessarily want to say I do x y and z, but I found that if you don't sometimes say that, they treat you in a way, my own experience as a Black woman – oh, you're a single parent – there is a category they read off as to who you are without really knowing anything about you

(Eleanor, social worker )

Cos I don't know if they [teachers] forget when they're (...) in the school (...) that there's actually two parents sitting [t]here [at the governors' meeting]. So we're all sort of speaking the language, I call it the language of Whiteness. It's like you've got to be part of that in order to communicate in certain situations. So the governing body communicates in a very White middle class language. So they forget themselves and start making these derogatory remarks about parents and (...) [I] sort of [sit] there thinking 'oh, so this is it'. [You] see very much what their core beliefs are. ...the parents... that they serve (...) [are from] a deprived community; [the] majority of parents are English as an additional language.

(Jean, College Lecturer)

## Perceptions of being 'middle class'

It is precisely the necessity to so carefully navigate through society, around the contours of racism, along with the perceived lack of acceptance from the White middle classes, which has contributed to reluctance amongst many of our participants in self-defining as 'middle class', despite their professional or managerial occupations. Our analysis reveals five distinct groupings in response to participants' views about the label 'middle class': those who are 'comfortably middle class', 'middle class ambivalent', 'working class with qualification', 'working class' and a final group comprising 'interrogators'. For example, one of our participants, Ray is hesitant about describing himself as middle class:

... an article I read recently (...) suggests, based on my income, I am middle class. It placed me in the top 10% of earners in the country. Even though I have argued that class is more than income, all sociological codifications I have seen have placed me in that category despite my discomfort and wriggling. To console myself I rely on the fact that my parents were working class with 'middle class aspirations' which makes me a result of their aspirations. I have multiple identifies: I am middle class by profession, working class by birth and attitude and African Caribbean by culture, history and social experience.

(Ray, Senior Management, Public Sector)

Formal markers of social class which attempt to render Ray straightforwardly middle class are, he argues, mollified by the class status of his parents and his Caribbean identity. Values and perceptions about class and race are central. As with many other participants, 'working class' is a childhood identity that is seen to have associations with hard work, honesty, integrity and good will. These attributes are perceived and experienced as at odds with 'middle classness', a class position which itself is seen to be heavily saturated by Whiteness. There is an additional aspect to Ray's subjective class positioning which pertains to his cultural identity and his experiences of racism in the UK. It is the range and intersection of these experiences that contribute to his discomfort about self-identifying as 'middle-class'.

We note considerable commonality and fluidity across the five groupings we have identified, in terms of participants' reasons for and, in some cases, hesitancy around inhabiting a particular class location. We contend, therefore, that participants' responses and feelings about how they position themselves in relation to the label 'middle class' need to be understood in the context of the relative newness of the Black middle classes, respondents' broadly similar working class trajectories alongside ongoing experiences of racism within a society that privileges and gives legitimacy to a dominant White middle class norm.

We argue that the Black middle classes in the UK are seeking a legitimate space in which to be comfortably 'Black' *and* 'middle class'.

Full paper:

Rollock, N., Vincent, C., Ball, S. & Gillborn (under review) *'Middle class by profession': class status and identification amongst the Black middle classes.*

I send my child to this [private] school yet I feel left out in that school (...) I feel as if I stand out like a square peg in a round hole which means that even if I am [middle class] possibly this whole notion of Black middle classness is entirely different to any notion of White middle classness. I don't think that they are the same. I think they are different and I think that, I think that it is the ethnicity issue that makes them different.

(Alice, researcher)

... I've spoken to White middle class people who know my background (...) I've got an education, you know I continue to learn etc. etc. and then there might be still something that they'll say to me that I think 'is it me or is what they've said to me just so not accepting of my experience?' So (...) I'm perceived to be of a certain class by virtue of my race.

(Jean, College lecturer)

.. I would probably still say I'm working class though that's probably not true, and I think it sounds almost twee to say that you're classless but it almost has to be. I went to [high status university]. I speak in a certain way so that if people didn't see me, if they heard me on the phone people would probably think of me as middle class. But, despite having gone to [university], and having had the education that I have and the kind of jobs that I've had I still find it hard to describe myself as middle-class and that's to do with my race.

(Lorraine, researcher)

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