

# Research Brief

## Class differences: Ethnicity and disadvantage

Dr Philip Kirby and Carl Cullinane

In recent years, there has been increasing discussion of the low school attainment of disadvantaged white British pupils, particularly boys.<sup>1</sup> Historically, ethnic minority pupils have faced the greatest educational challenges. Today, these patterns have been at least partially reversed as many ethnic minority pupils have seen improved results relative to the national average.

Several explanations have been proposed for this shift – the popularity of private tutors amongst ethnic groups and the latter's concentration in large urban areas such as London (where average results have improved in recent years, with some suggesting that ethnic minorities have driven this progress), the impact of supplementary schools, and differing levels of parental aspiration, amongst others.<sup>2</sup> Within schools, improved outcomes for some groups have been linked to the Ethnic Minority Achievement Grants, which were introduced in 1999 and have now been subsumed into the Direct Schools Grant.<sup>3</sup>

However, while ethnic minority pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) have seen gains relative to their white British counterparts at school, they often face challenges after secondary education. Ethnic minorities now enrol in university at rates higher than their proportion of the national population, but fewer attend top universities and enter full-time employment after graduation. Every ethnic minority group apart from Gypsy/Roma attend university at a higher rate than white British. But of those who enrol at university, most minority groups rank below white British when it comes to attending Russell Group institutions.

The well-publicised debates around disadvantaged boys should also not detract from the challenges of other groups and specific ethnic minority

### Key findings

- White British FSM (Free School Meals) boys achieve the lowest grades at GCSE of any main ethnic group, with just 24% achieving 5 A\*-C grades at GCSE, inc. English and maths. They have now been either the lowest or second lowest performing ethnic group every year for a decade. White British FSM girls are also the lowest performing main female ethnic group, with 32% achieving the same measure.
- In the past ten years, Bangladeshi, black African and Chinese FSM pupils have improved substantially more than the national average. These three groups have improved by more than 20 percentage points since 2006 on the benchmark five GCSE measure, while the national average has improved by about 13.5 percentage points.
- While certain ethnic minority FSM pupils perform better on attainment than the national average at GCSE (such as Chinese, Bangladeshi and Indian), others still struggle (such as black Caribbean and Irish).
- Travellers of Irish heritage and Gypsy/Roma communities perform the lowest on all main attainment measures. These are small itinerant groups, facing particular educational challenges, requiring specific policy assistance.
- 45% of white British pupils attend university after leaving school, the lowest rate of all ethnicities, excluding Gypsy/Roma. However, they have better rates of entering elite universities. Of those who enrol in university, 24% of white British students attend a Russell Group institution, more than most minority ethnic groups. Black African and Pakistani students show

the largest differential between high university attendance and low enrolment in Russell Group universities.

- The attainment gaps between non-FSM and FSM boys are the largest for Irish and white British boys. The gap between non-FSM and FSM Irish boys on the benchmark five GCSE measure is 46 percentage points; for white British pupils, 32 percentage points. The gap is smallest for Chinese (3 percentage points) and Bangladeshi (9 percentage points) boys.
- The attainment gap between FSM boys and FSM girls overall is about 8 percentage points, with girls scoring higher. For black Caribbean pupils, nearly 17 percentage points more girls than boys achieve 5A\*-C grades at GCSE.
- In recent decades, the aggregate performance of ethnic minority pupils has overtaken white British pupils. This potentially suggests the success of policies such as the Ethnic Minority Attainment Grant but also reflects the UK's changing demographics.
- In London, there are stark differences between the performance of white FSM-eligible pupils by borough. In Westminster, 50% achieve 5 A\*-C grades at GCSE, inc. English and maths. In Enfield (25.6%) and Newham (25.5%), about half this proportion.
- Several reasons have been offered for the differing performance between ethnic groups, including relative levels of aspiration, socio-economic inequalities and the prominence of particular cultural and curricular norms in education.

groups at secondary school level. Disadvantaged girls, for example, have also been left behind by their female peers, albeit they perform better than boys. And if all pupils are considered, not just FSM, black pupils are the lowest performing major ethnic group.

In this brief, we focus on the outcomes of FSM-eligible pupils at GCSE, disaggregated by ethnic group. The brief concludes by highlighting some of the key reasons that have been offered for why different groups achieve differently, and policy options to address these inequalities.

## Background – The relative size and disadvantage levels of ethnic groups

Reference to ethnic group is made at two levels by the Department for Education: major (white, mixed, Asian, black, Chinese and other) and minor (which includes sub-groups, such as black Caribbean, black African, and so forth). Here, all data has been sourced from the Department for Education’s national tables and Freedom of Information requests.<sup>4</sup>

According to the latest census (2011), about 80.5% of the UK population is white British, 2.2% is mixed, 7.5% is Asian and 3.3% is black.<sup>5</sup> According to the Department for Work and Pensions, about 19% of the white population in the UK is impoverished, compared to 26% of the mixed population, 36% of the Asian and 40% of the black.<sup>6</sup>

Nearly two thirds (64.3%) of FSM pupils entering GCSEs are white British – over 10 times the size of the next largest minor ethnic group, Pakistani (6.3%). In 2015, nearly 50,000 white British FSM pupils sat GCSEs together with over 350,000 white British non-FSM pupils.

With the exception of Chinese pupils, FSM white pupils make up the smallest percentage of their entire ethnic group at GCSE (11.9%). For the other major ethnic groups, the proportions are: mixed (19.6%), Asian (19.2%), black (25.3%) and any other ethnic group (26.5%).

## Results – Ethnic group performance at GCSE

### Pupils achieving five good GCSEs in 2015

In 2015, Chinese FSM pupils achieved the highest proportion of five or more GCSEs at A\*-C, including English and maths (5A\*CEM) with 74%, followed by Asian (48.2%), black (41.2%), mixed (37.5%) and white (28.3%). Excluding only traveller and Gypsy/ Roma communities, white British pupils had the poorest performance with 27.9%.

There are substantial differences in how FSM and non-FSM pupils perform

Figure 1: No. of FSM-eligible pupils entering GCSE exams (2015)

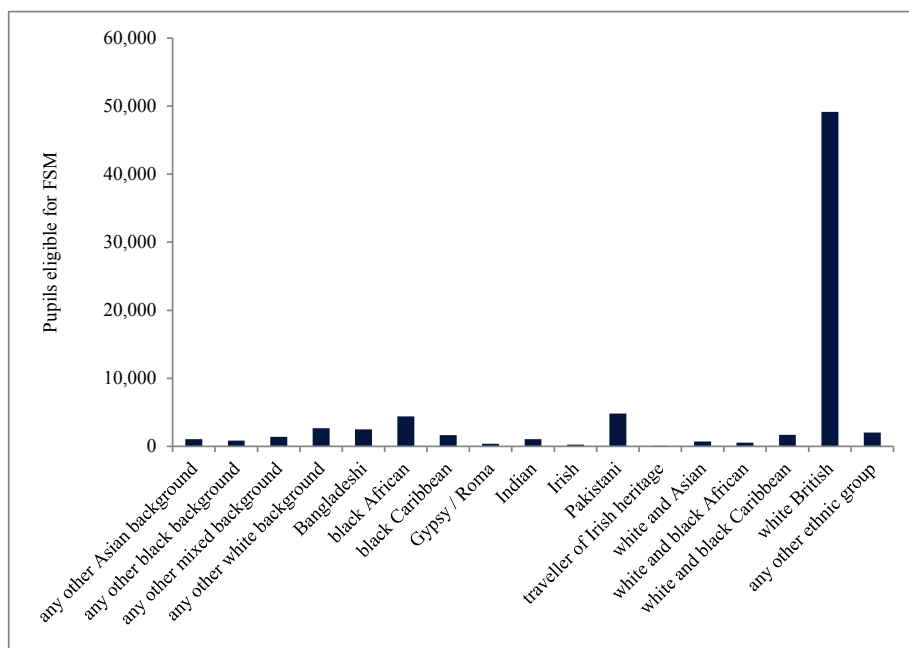
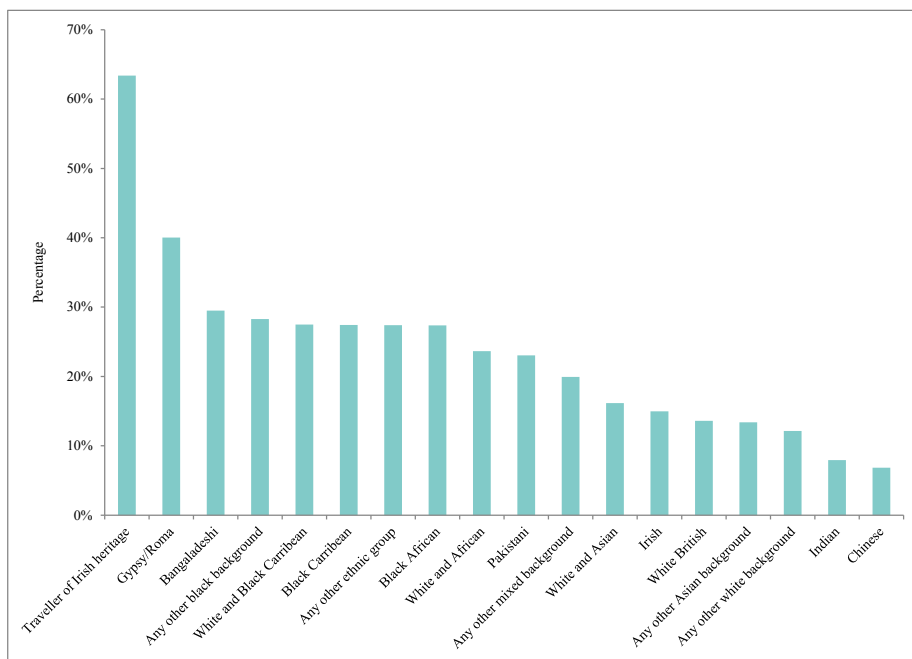


Figure 2: Proportion of pupils (years 7-11) receiving FSM by ethnicity



relative to each other within ethnic groups, too. Irish pupils, for example, perform extremely well overall at GCSE (behind only Chinese and Indian pupils), but the poorest Irish pupils do not – the success of Irish pupils is driven by those who are not disadvantaged. Ranked by the performance of FSM pupils, the Irish ethnic group falls below the national average. (It should be noted that, as with the Chinese, the Irish ethnic group is relatively small.)

### Pupils achieving five good GCSEs, 2006-2015

Focusing on those groups below the national average in 2015, FSM white

British pupils have been struggling for at least a decade, while FSM black Caribbean pupils and pupils from any other black background dipped below the national average only last year.

However, across the same period, certain groups have performed substantially above average, especially Bangladeshi, black African and Chinese FSM pupils. In the last 10 years, the proportion of Bangladeshi students achieving 5A\*CEM has improved by over 20 percentage points. This is particularly significant. In the early 1990s, Bangladeshi students were underperforming relative to white

British pupils, but over the last decade Bangladeshi FSM students have improved faster than any other ethnic group.<sup>7</sup>

During the same period, the average across all pupils was 13.5 percentage points. The minor ethnic groups that have improved less than average across this period are, in order of low achievement to high: white and Asian, any other black background, white British, Irish, black Caribbean, white and black Caribbean. Five of these were performing below the national average last year.

### University attendance and ethnicity

Substantial variation also exists between ethnicities in the rates of school leavers attending higher education and the type of institutions they attend. The latest figures for the destinations of those who took A levels in 2014 show that 45% of white British pupils attended a UK higher education institution, below the national average of 48%, and below every minority ethnic group bar the Gypsy/Roma community.<sup>8</sup> The highest levels of Higher Education (HE) attendance were among Chinese (74%), Indian (69%) and black African (68%) school leavers. Caribbean students also fell below the national average.

However, as Figure 7 shows, there were pronounced differences in the rates attending elite Russell Group institutions. Of those attending a higher education institution, 24.4% of white British students enrolled in a Russell Group university, among the highest

Figure 3: % achieving 5A\*CEM, all pupils (major groups capitalised)

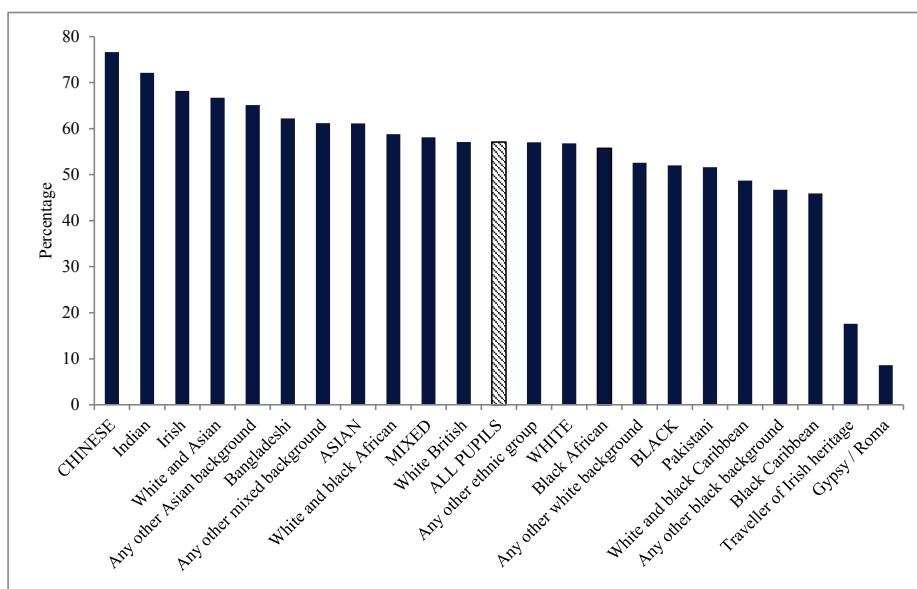


Figure 4: % achieving 5A\*CEM, by pupil type (major groups capitalised)

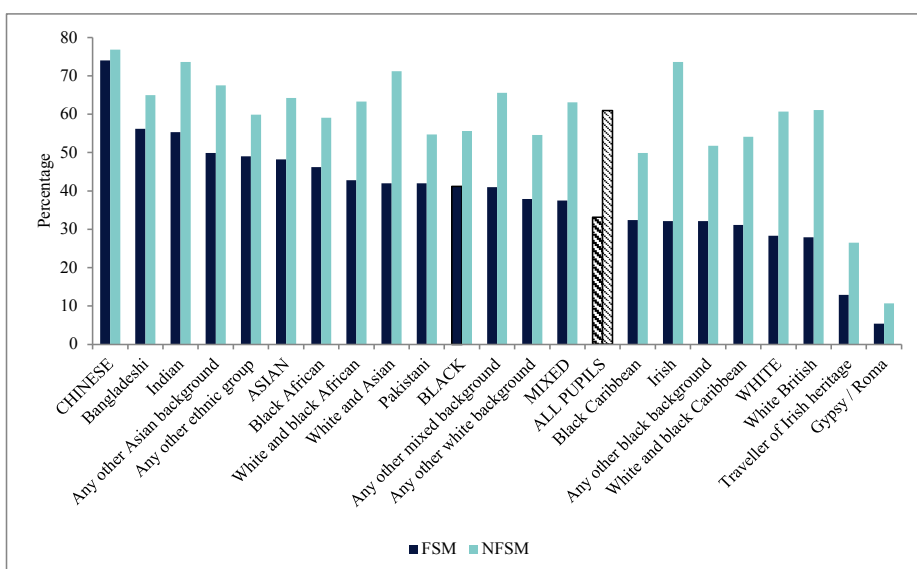
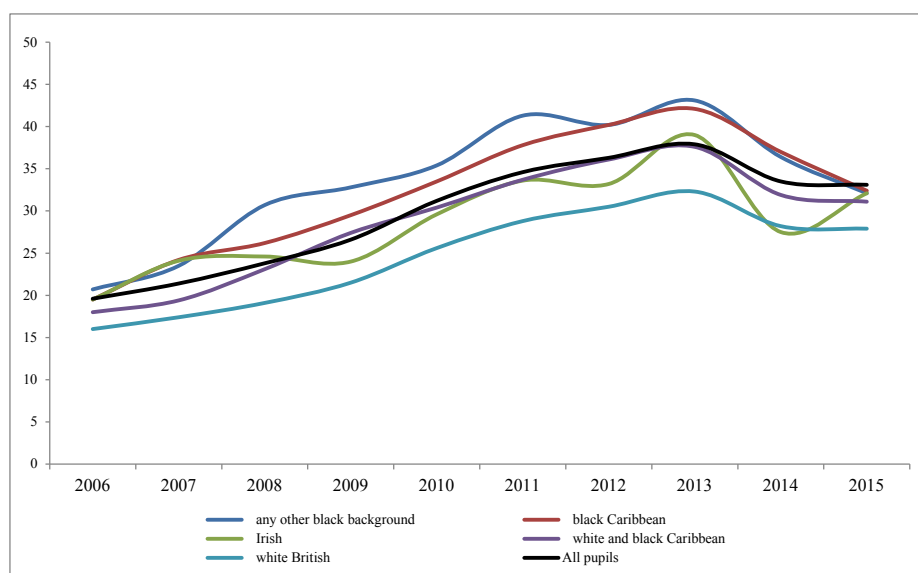


Figure 5: % achieving 5A\*CEM, FSM pupils, 2006-2015



rate of any group. Chinese, white British, and Irish showed the highest rates of

entry into Russell Group universities, with other black background, black Caribbean, Irish traveller and Gypsy/Roma showing the lowest. For example, despite both having the highest university attendance rates overall, 39.2% of Chinese university attenders went to a Russell Group university, compared to only 13.2% of black African students. While progress has been made to improve higher education access for minority ethnic groups, there remain clear challenges when it comes to the top universities.

### Attainment gaps and gender in 2015

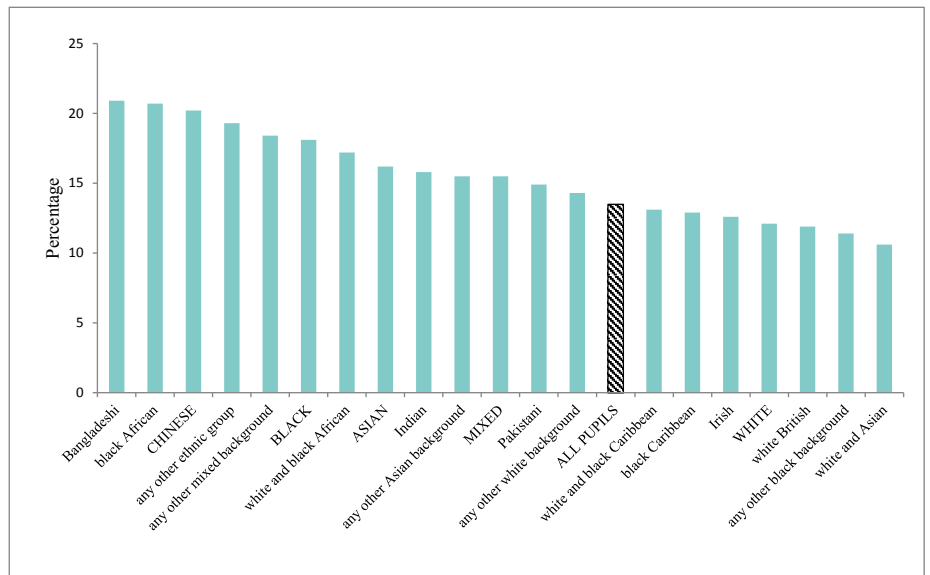
Within almost all ethnic groups, girls outperform boys at GCSE – excluding only white and Asian, and the tiny Gypsy/Roma community. While FSM-eligible white British boys are the poorest performing ethnic group of

substantial size and are frequently focused on in discussions of ethnicity, their female counterparts are also the poorest performing major ethnic group at GCSE.<sup>9</sup> White British girls, however, perform substantially better than their white British male peers, which is presumably why they have not been subject to the same concerns as boys.<sup>10</sup>

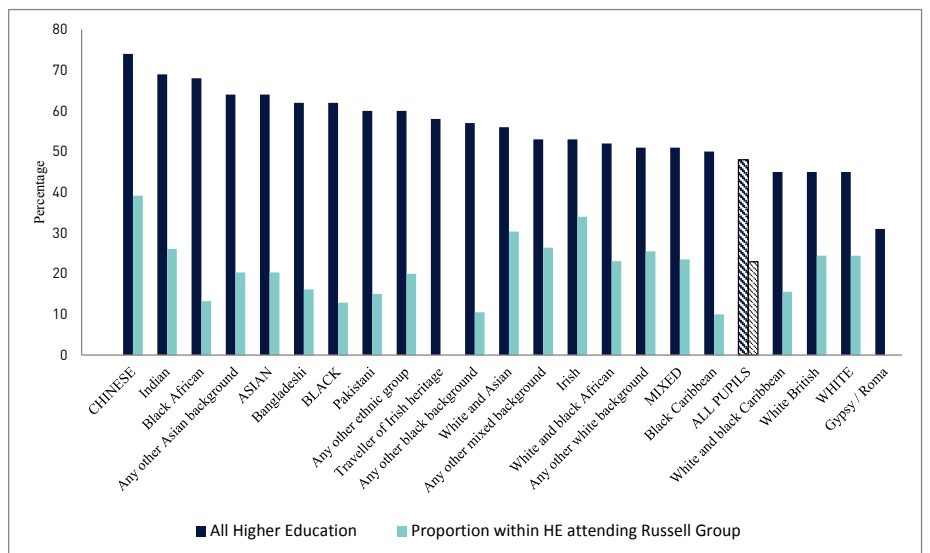
The attainment gap (between FSM and non-FSM pupils) is also instructive for both genders. This shows that Irish pupils, both male and female, have the largest attainment gap – for Irish boys, this is 46 percentage points, far higher than the attainment gap for all pupils (33 percentage points). The smallest attainment gap for both genders is for Chinese pupils, with FSM and non-FSM pupils performing almost identically, although the number of Chinese pupils entitled to FSM is very small. The largest attainment gaps for disadvantaged Irish and white British pupils suggest that there exists particular socio-economic segregation in these communities.

When ethnic groups are ranked by the gap between FSM girls and FSM boys, the black Caribbean group shows the largest differential (16.5 percentage points, in favour of girls). Black Caribbean girls do much better than black Caribbean boys, suggesting particular challenges facing the boys that are not affecting the girls, or that are not affecting them as much. It is worth noting, of course, that a smaller gap is not necessarily an indication of greater success – the gap between FSM white British girls and boys is half the size

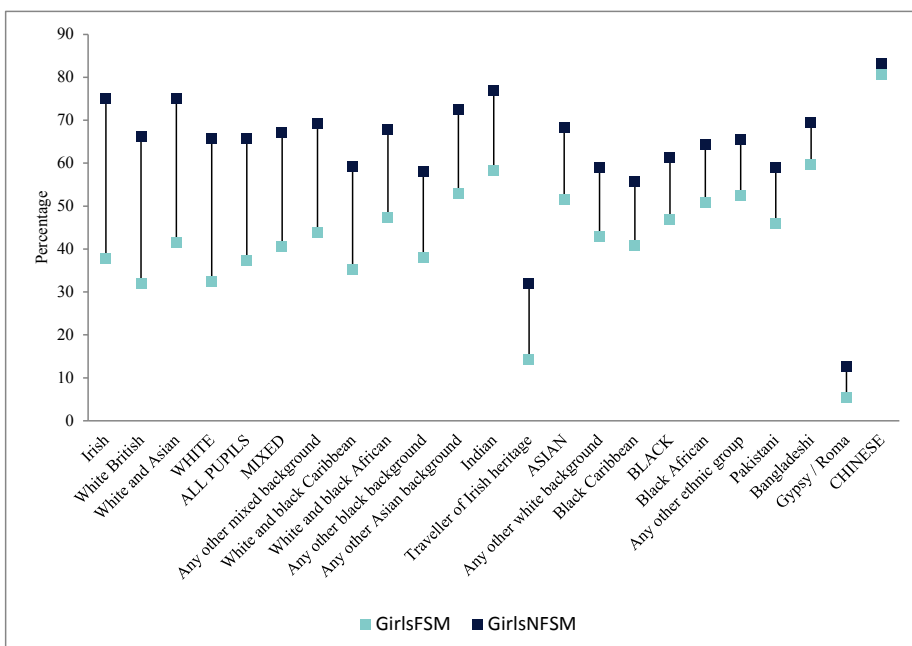
**Figure 6: Percentage point improvement in % achieving 5A\*CEM, FSM pupils, 2006-2015**



**Figure 7: % attending Higher Education institutions by ethnicity, state funded mainstream schools and colleges**



**Figure 8: Attainment gap between % of non-FSM and FSM girls achieving 5A\*CEM**



(8 percentage points) of that between FSM black Caribbean boys and girls, but both of the former perform below both of the latter.

**The London picture**

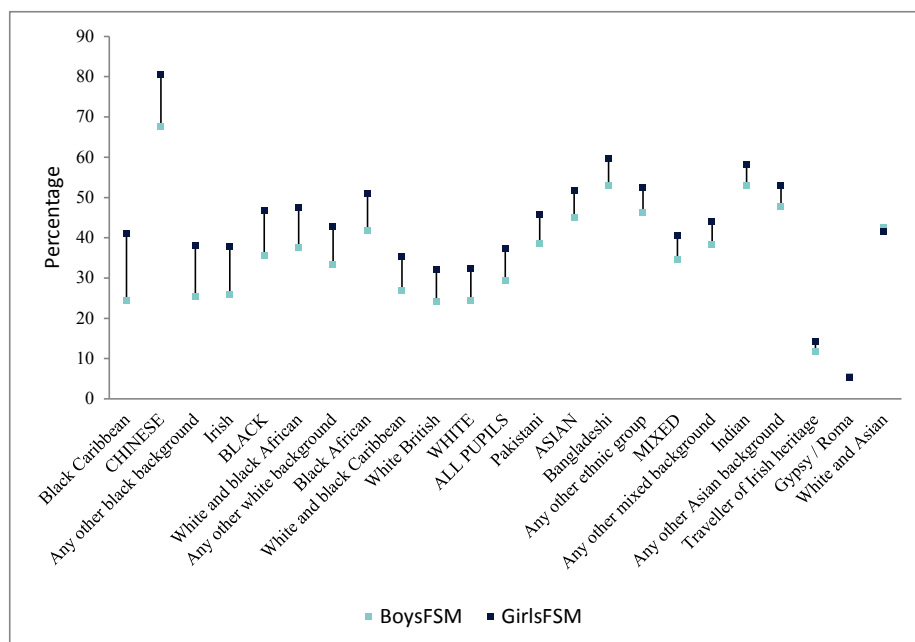
In London, there are stark differences between the performance of white FSM pupils, when disaggregated by borough. In Westminster, FSM pupils average 58.8% on the 5A\*CEM measure. Westminster has relatively few FSM white British pupils entering GCSEs (n=34), but not the fewest in London (Brent, Kensington and Chelsea, and Haringey all have fewer). The poorest performing boroughs for white FSM pupils are Newham, Enfield and Greenwich, in that order. These perform below the English average, despite being in London, which generally has higher results than the rest of the country.

The overall high performance of London was recently cited as best-practice by the House of Commons Education Committee's report on the underachievement of white working class boys, which noted that, "The improvements in London's educational performance suggest that the problem of white working class underachievement in education can be tackled. In determining future policy in this area the Government must carefully assess what positive impact the London Challenge may have had and what its key features were."<sup>11</sup> The DfE's official evaluation of the London Challenge initiative made several policy recommendations, concluding that, "Perhaps the most effective aspect of the City challenge was that it recognised that individuals and school communities tend to thrive when they feel trusted, supported and encouraged."<sup>12</sup>

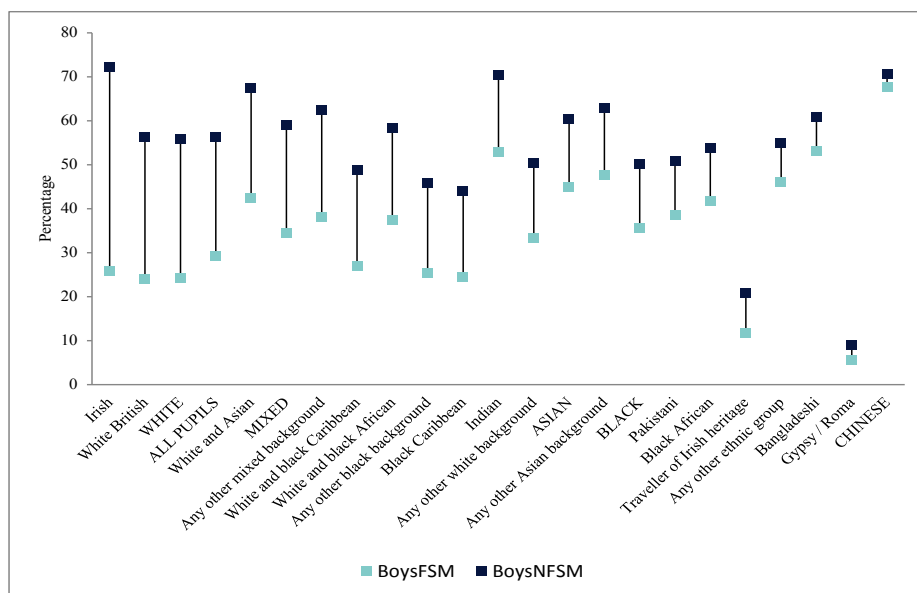
Figures for 2015 show how FSM-eligible white British pupils have been left behind by FSM-eligible Asian pupils in the capital. Across London as a whole, 63.1% of Bangladeshi FSM pupils achieve five good GCSEs, compared to 58.6% of Indian and 55.5% of Pakistani. However, the average achieved by white British FSM pupils in London is just 32.9% on the same measure. Most Bangladeshi FSM pupils are located in Tower Hamlets, where 64.2% of 804 pupils in 2015 achieved five good GCSEs (of 1,484 pupils in London overall).

## Discussion

**Figure 10: Attainment gap between % of FSM boys and FSM girls achieving 5A\*CEM**



**Figure 9: Attainment gap between % of non-FSM and FSM boys achieving 5A\*CEM**



Explanations for differences in attainment by ethnic group are multiple and complex. Three of the most commonly cited are parent/ pupil aspirations, socio-economic inequalities and cultural norms.

With reference to aspiration, longitudinal analysis has shown that parents' desire for their children to continue in education post-16 and willingness to be involved in schooling, both positively affect attainment.<sup>13</sup> Some groups, such as black African, appear to have higher levels of aspiration than others, with pupils showing greater interest in schooling, despite relatively high levels of poverty.<sup>14</sup> The aspirations of ethnic minority families have been cited as the

explanation for the recent improvement in average grades in London, where the proportion of ethnic minority communities is high.<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, it is important to remember that aspirations are limited by socio-economic inequalities – while black African pupils and the other more successful groups discussed above have improved despite these, many other groups have not. Research has shown that environments more conducive to school work – such as spaces with low levels of noise – are more common in middle-class than working-class homes, and thus have different effects on different ethnic groups.<sup>16</sup> Similar patterns exist for other educational costs borne by parents, including the provision of home computers and private tutors – who are more commonly employed to assist non-FSM-eligible children than FSM.<sup>17</sup> In addition, previous Sutton Trust research has identified that more experienced teachers generally teach at more advantaged state schools.<sup>18</sup>

Cultural and curricular norms have been cited as reasons for the underperformance of disadvantaged white and ethnic minority groups too. In focus groups undertaken by Lambeth Council, parents from poorer backgrounds highlighted a perceived lack of white culture in the national curriculum, a sense of marginalisation in their own communities and a perceived unfair weighting of resources toward immigrant children/ those learning English.<sup>19</sup> Concerns over representation in the curriculum are shared by other, quite different communities, too. Black

supplementary schools, for example, were founded partly on criticism of how the national curriculum portrayed (or did not portray) black history. And a key part of the movement has been to offer a rejoinder to the perceived biases of the national curriculum.<sup>20</sup> Clearly, there is more work to be done to ensure that disparate communities feel they are represented in the curriculum.

This is a very brief summary, designed to highlight some of the complexity in this area, and how different arguments tilt toward individual and societal responsibility. Despite similar socio-economic backgrounds, some groups have improved more than others, but not all disadvantaged groups have been able to replicate this success. Policy options in this area, therefore, have addressed specific community issues in order to support those groups facing continuing difficulties.

## Policy directions

The House of Commons Education Committee recently made several recommendations regarding white working class pupils' academic underperformance. The Committee suggests that greater data be made available about such pupils, becoming part of all DfE statistical reports; incentives be provided to encourage

the best teachers to work in the most challenging schools; and that the funding formula be revisited, to ensure allocation matches need. It also suggests that further research be conducted into best practice by schools and local authorities, why certain ethnic minorities have seen improvements in recent years (and whether lessons can be learnt from them), and the impact of home learning environments in early years. Of existing research, it recommends the Education Endowment Foundation's toolkit of strategies to improve FSM-eligible pupils' outcomes.<sup>21</sup>

Ofsted have arrived at similar conclusions. With particular reference to white working class pupils, they suggest that the most important interventions include: "rigorous monitoring of data and its effective use in feedback, planning, support and intervention; ensuring access to the highest quality teaching; providing strong and visionary leadership; working with pupils and parents to increase engagement and raise expectations."<sup>22</sup>

In recent years, several programmes have been implemented to improve ethnic minority attainment, including the aforementioned EMAGs, the Excellence in Cities/ EMAG pilot project, the ethnic minority component of the National Strategies, the Aiming High: African Caribbean Achievement Project

and the Minority Ethnic Achievement Programme.<sup>23</sup> According to a DfE review, evidence on the precise impact of these is lacking.<sup>24</sup> However, the review does identify five common positive themes across these programmes: "strong leadership, good use of monitoring systems, a school ethos that valued diversity and had high expectations of pupils, a flexible and inclusive curriculum and engagement with parents and the wider community."<sup>25</sup> Targeted attainment improvement schemes, based on best practice identified from previous examples such as the EMAG, offer one possible direction for policy seeking to narrow the attainment gap between ethnic groups.

Outside of the main curriculum, non-academic skills are also an increasingly important part of a young person's skills base. The Sutton Trust has previously recommended that disadvantaged pupils be given greater access to extracurricular activities, to support and encourage self-directed study, homework completion, reading for pleasure and participation in educational trips – extracurricular activities that provide academic and non-academic dividends.<sup>26</sup> Enrichment vouchers, funded through the Pupil Premium, are one method through which this might be achieved.

**References available online.**

## Recommendations

### **1. Implement targeted attainment improvement programmes for disadvantaged white British pupils**

Nearly two thirds of FSM-eligible pupils at GCSE are white British and their results are among the lowest, especially for boys. Schools should use the Education Endowment Foundation's 'Teaching and Learning Toolkit' to improve this group's outcomes, as recommended by the House of Commons Education Committee.

### **2. Implement targeted attainment improvement programmes for poorly performing disadvantaged ethnic minority pupils**

While ethnic minority performance has improved overall, some pupils from black, Caribbean and Irish backgrounds are still struggling. Previous targeted schemes, such as Ethnic Minority Achievement Grants, have been subsumed into the Direct Schools Grant. More need to be implemented, maintained and evaluated.

### **3. Create more opportunities for disadvantaged ethnic groups to supplement core lessons**

Disadvantaged groups need support to engage in self-directed study, do sufficient homework, read more books and undertake educational trips – the extracurricular activities proven to provide academic and non-academic dividends. Enrichment vouchers should be made available to pupils, funded through the Pupil Premium.

### **4. Introduce a government fund to support highly-able pupils**

The government should introduce a dedicated fund to support highly-able pupils. The fund would lever schools' own spending in this area to encourage the development of cost effective programmes aimed at this often-neglected target group.

### **5. Encourage more highly-qualified teachers to teach in deprived schools**

Previous Sutton Trust research has shown that teachers in advantaged schools are more experienced than those in deprived schools. Polling of teachers finds that financial incentives and more free periods would best attract teachers to teach in deprived schools; incentives which could be facilitated through the new National Teaching Service.