REVIEW ESSAY
'Getting on' rather than 'getting by': ethnicity, class and 'success against the odds'

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Generating genius: black boys in search of love, ritual and schooling, by T. Sewell, Stoke-on-Trent, Trentham, 2009, 152 pp., £18.99 (paperback) ISBN 978-1-85-856368-8

Black youth matters: transitions from school to success, by C. Wright, P. Standen and T. Patel, London, Routledge, 2010, 163 pp., £23.99 (paperback) ISBN 978-0-41-599512-2

Ethnicity class and aspiration: understanding London's new East End, by T. Butler and C. Hamnett, Bristol, The Policy Press, 2011, 264 pp., £23.99 (paperback) ISBN 978-1-84-742650-5

The disturbances that took place across English towns and cities in 2011 raised significant debate and discussion about their causes and the motivations of the 'rioters'. Media and official explanations citing criminality and opportunism, repeated the now familiar narratives of cultural deficit, blaming absent fathers, poor parenting and a lack of responsibility and aspiration (Odone 2011). Prime Minister David Cameron announced the 'moral collapse' of a society in which 'children without fathers, schools without discipline and reward without effort' were to blame for the disturbances. Socio-political explanations, on the other hand, emphasised structural inequalities and/or rampant consumerism (Bauman 2011) brought about by a 'feral' capitalism (Harvey 2011).

Whichever explanation one accepts, it is difficult to deny the significance of the timing of the events and the hopelessness they engendered. The 'riots' occurred a year into the coalition government's first term in power and with the imminence of unprecedented cuts to public spending threatening to intensify advanced levels of marginality (Wacquant 2008) and inequality experienced by a growing number of Britain's (multi-ethnic) poor communities. The books under review were written before the 'riots' but each takes up themes that are pertinent to the discussion of

their aftermath. All three books, in different ways and from different perspectives, offer statements on patterns and systems of opportunity and constraint/inequality and the individual and collective capacity of people to deal with these. Each book presents its own version of 'success against the odds' and will significantly add to the sociological literature on ethnicity and education.

Researched and written towards the end of New Labour's third term in office, the books also offer a timely opportunity to reflect on recent government policies emphasising 'aspiration', 'equality of opportunity' and social mobility.

New Labour and the promise of 'equality of opportunity'

One of the main themes that runs across the books is that of educational inequalities – an issue that New Labour promised it would address through a renewed emphasis on 'equality of opportunity' after 18 years of conservation policies in which equality issues were effectively marginalised (Tomlinson 2008; Gillborn 2008). Both through its first White Paper that focused on education, Excellence in Schools (Department for Education and Employment 1997), and the setting up of the Social Exclusion Unit in 1998, there was an explicit recognition of the scale of raced inequalities (Gillborn 2008). The launch of the Macpherson inquiry into the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993 and the publication of its damning report in 1998 seemed to further signal a commitment to tackling raced inequalities. The Macpherson inquiry's finding that 'institutional racism' had prevented the police from fully investigating the death of the murdered teenager marked a watershed in British politics. But critics have since argued that the early promise of tackling inequalities did not translate into meaningful action (Tomlinson 2008; Gillborn 2008).

Various assessments of New Labour's educational legacy have concluded that, despite some positive redistributive measures such as Sure Start, New Labour largely continued with the neoliberal policies embarked on by earlier Conservative governments. Rather than equalising opportunities, analyses (Reay 2008) suggest that policies and initiatives such as widening participation and parental choice have enhanced white middle-class choice and advantage, while reinscribing working-class and racialised disadvantage.

Sociologists of education have argued that, despite the rhetoric of inclusion, the continued overt focus on achievement has enabled so-called 'model minorities' such as middle-class Indians and Chinese students to be held out as evidence of 'meritocracy at work', but the for the vast majority of minoritised (and working-class) students the dominant version of 'success' has remained an illusion. Although sociologists of education have debated the extent to which raced, classed and gendered inequalities have widened or been reduced for particular groups, the research evidence points overwhelmingly to class and ethnicity as the most significant factors in predicting educational outcomes.

Ethnic minorities, schooling and disadvantage: beyond narratives of 'failure'

Generating Genius and Black Youth Matters address issues in the schooling of British black African-Caribbean youth who, by most sociological assessments, have been identified as among the biggest losers in the educational 'achievement' game. Gillborn shows that since the late 1980s the number of children from all of the minority groups gaining five or more grades A*–C has risen but Black African-Caribbean students find themselves even further behind their white counterparts than they were in the 1980s: in 1989, 30% of white students achieved five or more higher grade passes, compared with 18% of black students (an inequity of 12 percentage points: 55% of white students and 35% black students achieved five or more higher grade passes). In 2004, the gap was 20 percentage points. White students are at least twice as likely as black Caribbean children to be identified as 'gifted and talented'. Figures on school exclusions show that, despite marked improvements since the mid-1990s when black Caribbean boys were six times more likely than their white counterparts to be permanently excluded, black boys are still more than twice as likely as white boys to be permanently excluded from school. The early evidence on exclusion from Academy schools presents a more disturbing picture – these newly formed schools exclude students at twice the rate of local authority schools, leaving black students over 3.6 times as likely to be excluded from an academy school than white students in local authority schools (Gillborn and Drew 2010).

This stark picture of black disadvantage in schooling forms the back- drop for Generating Genius and Black Youth Matters, but the authors of both books declare a determination to go beyond narratives of black 'failure'.

Tony Sewell has been a controversial figure in debates about black 'under-achievement' and his latest book presents an equally provocative challenge to sociologists of education. In Generating Genius, Sewell presents a forceful, if at times, contradictory, account of why black boys lag behind their white and Asian counterparts. He acknowledges structural constraints in the form of institutionalised racism (although this is often equated with teacher attitudes) but Sewell argues that we need to go beyond institutional racism, 'not because racism has gone away but because it is not powerful enough in education systems to prevent individuals succeeding' (3).

Instead, Sewell emphasises the significance of 'cultural legacy', which he defines as the capacity for hard work and effort. He argues that 'the social capital possessed by certain Asian and white middle-class students is a by-product

of their culture' (4). Black boys lack this social capital because of 'over-mothering' and 'under-fathering' in their upbringing. Sewell argues that:

> Two problems arise from the over feminised raising of African Caribbean boys. The first is that with the onset of adolescence there is no male role model to lock down the destructive instincts that exist within all males. Sec- ond, in his own mind no child is without a father. In the absence of a given story he will make up his own. This will usually be found among 'dons', male peer groups (who also don't have fathers). (33)

The essentialist and pathological connotations of the above statement do not need to be spelled out. Cultural-deficit models have underpinned policy and academic explanations of the apparent underachievement of minority students since the 1970s. The emphasis on a lack of discipline due to absent fathers or poor parenting is often contrasted with the tight or 'strong' discipline of Asian families – although in the aftermath of the 'war on terror' this same 'good' social capital was recast as 'bad', because 'overly strict' traditional Muslim families were seen as a potential cause of the radicalisation of Muslim youth. In the case of the 2011 disturbances, attention has returned to pathological accounts of black African-Caribbean and white working-class families.

The last three chapters present case studies of Samoa, Jamaica and Sewell's Genius programme that was delivered at universities in the United Kingdom and in the Jamaica over four successive summers. A group of 25 boys aged 12 and 13 from London and the South East spent three intensive weeks over four summers at various university locations in England gaining hands on experience of science, engineering and medicine.

The boys were exposed to a university environment and a curriculum for science and engineering that is usually reserved for 18 year olds. Like the contestants in the BBC television show The Apprentice, the boys in teams elected project leaders for tasks that would lead to rewards and prizes. All of the boys who took part in the project were successful in achieving nine or more GCSE results at the requisite A*–C grades, and for Sewell this affirms his theory that genius is not innate but something that be cultivated through hard work and effort and ritual.

Generating Genius is a passionately written book. Although it contains many contradictions – the case studies do not always support Sewell's claims; he presents mothers as 'over-bearing' yet at the same time 'too weak' to instil the right level of discipline in their sons; he asserts governments will save a lot of money by following his principles, but does not suggest how such projects would be funded or sustained – it is an important book that promises to throw open the debate about black boys and achievement.

In Black Youth Matters, Wright, Standen, and Patel also focus on 'how young black people' are able to transform 'failure into personal success' (1) but they present a very different reading (to Sewell's) of the factors that

lead to school exclusions. They draw on their two-year longitudinal study with 33 young people aged 14–19 who had previously been excluded from school, and set out to show how, with the support of their family, peers, and community organisations, and with 'monumental personal effort', they man- age, survive and recover from this earlier school failure. The young people were resident in Nottingham and London and had been excluded from both state and independent schools.

The book offers a detailed and rich analysis of the strategies of young black people in overcoming their marginalised status as school excludees. Wright and her colleagues successfully challenge the invisibility of black youth in the sociological literature on youth transitions – much of which also sees young people's choices as highly individualised within the context of a 'risk society' (Beck 1992). Drawing on a theoretical framework that combined black feminist and postcolonial theories with critical race theory and symbolic internationalism, they put forward an alternative and more nuanced account that argues for the continued significance of traditional institutions such as the family and community in shaping young people's trajectories.

Two theoretical concepts are key to their analysis of the resourcefulness of young people in overcoming the marignalisation they experience as school excludees – Thomson et al.'s (2002) 'critical moments', and Yosso's (2005) reworked and racialised notion of 'aspirational capital', which suggests a 'culture of possibility' or 'resilience' among black communities. They argue that, for most of the young people, exclusion from school represents the main 'critical moment' from which they are able to reassess their lives. Aspirational capital which exists among the community, is drawn on by the young people to reconstruct their identities first through a politicised recognition of the reality of structural racism and subsequently to help them to resume and complete their schooling. They list a number of community organisations, many initiated by black parents while others were local authority funded.

Wright, Standen, and Patel's analysis adeptly bring together themes of culture, structure and agency – it is the structural constraints of the system that lead to the labelling of young black people as 'trouble makers' or 'aggressive', but through the cultural capital available in their community and through their own agency and motivation, the young people are able to get themselves back on track to complete their full-time education. This is a hugely important finding since much of the recent research shows that the consequences of school exclusion can be devastating. Few excluded students ever complete their education in mainstream institutions and the link between school exclusions and continued marginality has been emphasised (Gillborn 2008).

Like Sewell, and much of the existing youth literature, Wright, Standen, and Patel argue that the peer group plays a significant role. But the peer

group is more than 'a cathartic expression of frustrated power and social maladjustment' (50). Rather, it also offers a means of positive action and control. Drawing on rich qualitative data, the authors show how the young people's friendship networks sometimes reinforced their negative status; they also worked to support their self-worth, reputation and a sense of together- ness. Peer groups encourage participants to cope with the stress of exclusion and transform their circumstances.

In contrast to Fordham's (1996) US study of schooling success, which found that young black people were relinquishing elements of their black culture and identity in order to succeed at school, Wright, Standen, and Patel found that young black people made successful transitions through harnessing the resources and capital found within the black community. Various community organisations and parents were hugely important in helping the young people to appeal against, challenge and overcome exclusion.

Ethnicity, Class and Aspiration also focuses on themes of educational advantage/disadvantage but through a broader analysis of economic and social change that has transformed the east London over the last 40 years. The backdrop for the study is the shift from a Fordist industrial economy to a new service-based economy that the authors argue has had consequences for the occupational class structure of east London. As the previous jobs in manufacturing and the docks have declined, so has much of its traditional (white) working class through outmigration, retirement, or death to be replaced by a large new white-collar lower-middle-class working in non- manual employment often in the burgeoning financial services sector, and a growing multi-ethnic population, some of whom have managed to move upwards and outwards, suburbanise with the white working class. The book is located in urban studies and the Chicago school of urban sociology. East London functions as a 'zone in transition', sorting and sifting those who are able to 'get on' from those who remain locked in marginality. Black youth are an 'absent presence' in this book, featuring only in the narratives of decline and decay offered by respondents and as the source of the disruption that parents seek to avoid in 'unpopular schools'.

The core of the book focuses on the educational strategies of this newly emerged middle-class set of parents who, despite their newfound status, struggle to access the schools that will deliver their aspirations of social mobility. Butler and Hamnett skilfully expose the limits of parental choice. Drawing on extensive analysis of Pupil Level Annual Schools Census data of applications and acceptances to schools and survey data that reveal parents preferences, they are able to chart the most and least desired schools in the area and parents chances to getting into them. The 'voices' of partici- pants, gained through in-depth interviewing, reveal the frustrations of many parents and their sense of failure when they are denied the school of their choice. Their analysis reveals how parental choice offers in reality 'no choice' for many parents in east London. To realistically stand a chance of

getting into a ‘good school’, parents need to live less than 150 metres from the school of their choice. The majority of respondents find themselves allocated their local school, which can often be their least desired choice (230).

‘Getting on’ rather than ‘getting by’: individual and collective aspirations

Along with ‘equality of opportunity’, ‘aspiration’ and ‘social mobility’ are the key themes that are debated in the books.

As Butler and Hamnett argue in Ethnicity Class and Aspiration, aspira- tion and the related concept of social mobility were central to the New Labour project: ‘Aspiration ... offered some hope of ‘getting on’ (rather than simply ‘getting by’) to groups who were not previously on the radar of the major political parties’ (91). New Labour’s cultivation of a ‘culture of aspiration’ (as opposed to a culture of expectation associated with ‘old’ labour) also enabled it to connect with a wider electoral community that has been largely neglected by previous governments.

Butler and Hamnett argue that both former New Labour prime ministers, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, were able to build on Nye Bevan’s concept of ‘poverty of aspiration’ and successfully incorporate the idea of aspiration as New Labour territory. In Gordon Brown’s first speech to the party as Prime Minister, he stated:

> I want a Britain where there is no longer any ceiling on where your talents and hard work can take you ... where what counts is where you come from and who you know, but what you aspire to and have it in yourself to become ... a Britain of aspirations and also a Britain of mutual obligation where all play our part and recognise the duties we owe to each other. (Brown cited in Butler and Hamnett, (91)

Brown’s juxtaposition between ‘getting on’ and ‘getting by’ helped New Labour not only to steal Conservative ground but also to engineer consent for the framing of neoliberal welfare policy.

Butler and Hamnett found that ethnic-minority parents were more likely to buy in to the ‘culture of aspiration’ that other social groups in their study and to an extent the authors support a model minorities argument (like Sewell) suggesting that some groups (largely Asian and Black African and Chinese) with ‘hard work and effort’ are able to work their way out of dis- advantage. But they mention only in passing that ‘many of these migrants had often enjoyed a relatively high status in their home country and had witnessed a decline in their social and occupational status when they arrived in Britain’ (93). In other words, these were already middle class parents.

Perhaps, then, this is not the real climb out of disadvantage that is claimed but a recouping of previous status after years of being held back by institutionalised racism and structural inequalities.

Further, evidence presented elsewhere in the book and in Black Youth Matters by Wright, Standen, and Patel suggests that that social mobility has declined for all groups but especially for ethnic minorities. Therefore the 'cultural of aspiration' – reinforced by neoliberal education polices such as parental choice is but an illusion for the majority.

However it is defined – a matter of rising income, or occupational status, or as Wright, Standen, and Patel, following Aldridge, define it: 'the movement or opportunities for movement between different social classes or occupational groups' (122) – most studies now show that in the United Kingdom social mobility rates have declined over recent decades. Blandon, Gregg, and Machin (2005) found a strong correlation between income inequality and social mobility in the United Kingdom. Despite investments in education designed to improve 'equality of opportunity', such as the expansion of higher education in the United Kingdom, these policies have benefitted the richest parents but overall have led to a fall in social mobility (Blandon, Gregg, and Machin 2005). Wright, Standen, and Patel cite evidence that ethnic minorities do less well in terms of social mobility than their white counterparts in the same class and also that the first generation of African-Caribbean migrants experienced a higher level of social mobility than second and third generations (Heath and McMahon 2005).

The books therefore raise pertinent questions about the future for young people. If social mobility levels have declined, yet governments continue to push a 'culture of aspiration', how should we read the presented stories of success against odds? Do they also contribute to the illusion of meritocracy or do they present a starting point for building hope for young people, especially in the context of the disturbances witnessed in London and elsewhere?

Mothers, aspirations and 'educational desire'

Sewell's contention that the 'over-feminised' upbringing that black boys receive is the most significant factor in their educational 'failure' will provoke considerable feminist criticism. According to Sewell, the genius programme worked because the boys were removed from a feminised context and exposed to what he describes as the right kind of male authority in the form of Sewell on the Genius project. Sewell refers to his own role as that one of 'a loving patriarch' who won the respect of the boys after setting firm boundaries. Sewell provides little or no evidence for his claims about single-female-headed households in the United Kingdom. The findings regarding women's role in the realisation of educational aspirations in both of the other books is another challenge to Sewell's link between over-feminisation and the educational 'failure' of black boys.

Echoing the findings of earlier feminist research (for example, Mirza and Reay 2000) on black supplementary schooling, Wright, Standen, and Patel found mothers to be at the forefront of family support of excludees. Mothers expected schools to be racist but the majority reacted to the exclusion of their children with a sense of personal failure which made them resolve to remedy the situation. Wright, Standen, and Patel (125) cite Reynolds (2005), who explains that 'a central aspect of [black mothers] mothering work involves the development of coping strategies that enable their children to cope with and respond to racial discrimination which they, as black children will most inevitably face'.

Although gender is presented as a tangential issue in Ethnicity, Class and Aspiration, it is notable that the majority of the parental 'voices' presented are those of women. But it is only at the end of their book that Butler and Hamnett explicitly acknowledge the role that women play in the realisation of educational aspirations.

They argue that women play a central role in social reproduction:

> Men may speak of their ambitions for their children's future, as we have seen, but invariably women are responsible for implementing them, by gathering intelligence at the school gate about the best schools to go to for, attending par- ents' evenings and even talking to us about it. Thus gender is crucial in terms of understanding how aspiration happens. Men may strategise about what they would like to see happen but it is women who make it happen. (242)

In defence of their lack of an explicit gendered analysis, they further argue:

> If we have joined the long line of (male) social scientists who have failed to make the implicit explicit, we can only hold up our hands, but in mitigation we could not see a way of doing so without diverting from our main story and that main story has been about the middle class in the widest sense. (243)

It is a pity that Butler and Hamnett did not develop the theme of gender fur- ther, especially given the weight of their own evidence. This omission lar- gely stems from their tendency to separate out axes of difference rather than taking an intersectional approach to their analysis. For example, when they discuss ethnic-minority members of their multi-ethnic middle class, they talk about them as middle-class parents rather than ethnic-minority middle-class parents. In doing so, they miss an opportunity to explore the racialised exclusionary mechanisms that might operate to prevent the children of these parents from accessing 'good schools'. These popular 'good' schools with high attainment are whiter middle-class schools and this whiteness is also critical factor in maintenance of market position.

In conclusion, despite some of the limitations discussed, all three books make a significant contribution to theoretical and policy debates concerning educational disadvantage, opportunity, aspiration and social mobility.

Returning to the point about the assessment of policy, the first two books offer a bleak assessment of polices and initiatives such as Widening Participation and Every Child Matters and the Educational Maintenance Allowance. For Sewell it is because such policies emphasise too strongly institutional racism. As discussed, Sewell sees institutional racism as secondary to cultural factors in explanations for the achievements of black boys.

Wright, Standen, and Patel's bleak assessment of a raft of government policies including widening participation is because the policies barely scratch the surface of structural inequality, placing their emphasis on raising aspirations rather than getting to the root cause of inequalities of access to higher education.

Butler and Hamnett present the most positive reading the impact of economic, social and policy change over the last decade for ethnic minorities. They argue:

> Although the frustrations and setbacks may have outnumbered the successes, we believe it is important to recognise that the last decade has provided the context for what many of our respondents would see as a period of time in which they stopped – at best – treading water and finally began to feel they were swimming with the current, this sense, at least by a least some of our respondents, that they were moving up the social hierarchy. (94)

This is implicitly an appraisal of New Labour policy and one that the authors qualify by pointing to the larger group of (multi-ethnic) poor work- ing-class people in east London who have not 'made it'. It is quite likely that, in light of the 'new' conservatism of the coalition government, there will be further reassessments of the New Labour years, not in any romantic way but perhaps to analyse its buffering role between different conservative governments and the 'safety nets' that New Labour put in place while purs- ing policies within an overall neoliberal framework. All of the books sup- port the contention that, for some individuals from within disadvantaged communities, individual mobility is possible – but based on the evidence presented in the books, and as the 'riots' in 2011 demonstrated, for the growing section of Britain's inner-city populations increasingly it is not.

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