Sociology

Ethnic Factors Affecting Achievement in Education

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Ethnic Factors Affecting Achievement in Education

Objectives

At the end of this quantum you will be able to understand the significance of ethnicity as a contributing factor in under-achievement in education.

PRE-REQUISITES

The textbook for this Unit is Haralambos – Themes and Perspectives III Edition 1991 or IV Edition 1995.

WELCOME

As well as the differences that exist between the relative achievements of boys and girls, disparities in educational achievement are also apparent between children from different ethnic backgrounds.

Ethnic Factors Affecting Achievement in Education

Most sociologists of education agree that the **performance** of immigrant children tends to be lower than that of the indigenous population.

(PERFORMANCE = Academic criteria used by educationalists etc.)

Children from immigrant families are proportionally over-represented in statistical evaluations of children with special educational needs.

It is also apparent that the education system is continuing to fail 2nd and 3rd generation children of Caribbean immigrants, especially boys.

Ethnic Factors Affecting Achievement in Education

Raising the Attainment of Minority Ethnic Pupils (1999)

This recent report produced by **OFSTED** highlights the serious under-achievement of some minority ethnic groups.

(OFSTED – The Office for Standards in Education – was established in 1992 to take responsibility for the inspection of all schools in England, and to report on a wider range of educational issues).

Four groups of children are identified by the report. Within these groups boys are doing worse than girls are:

Pakistani

Black Caribbean

Bangladeshi

Gypsy Traveller
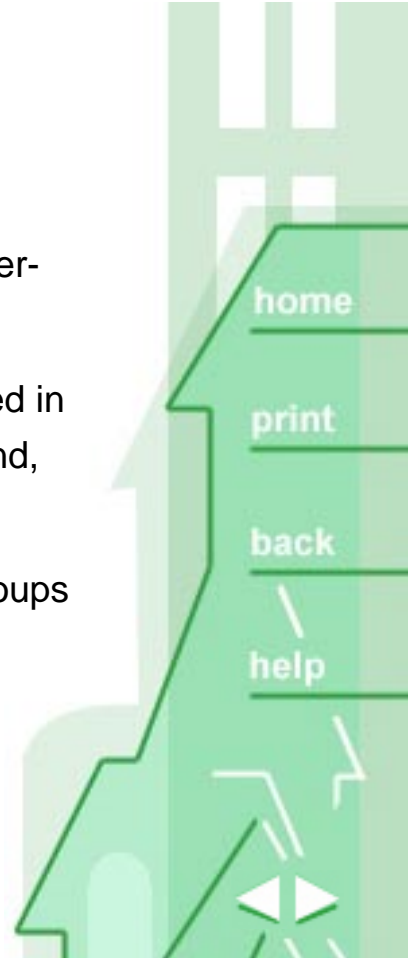
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The report identifies a clear and urgent need to raise attainment among minority ethnic groups. OFSTED has highlighted the need for schools and local education authorities to do more to address the under-achievement: the report indicates that schools are failing to facilitate and support the achievement of these groups (rather than identifying the children themselves as failures).

Townsend et al. indicated from the early '70s that minority children were consistently clustered in the lower streams, particularly West Indians.

This was confirmed in 1981 by M Taylor in **Caught Between** – a review of research into the education of pupils of West Indian origin.
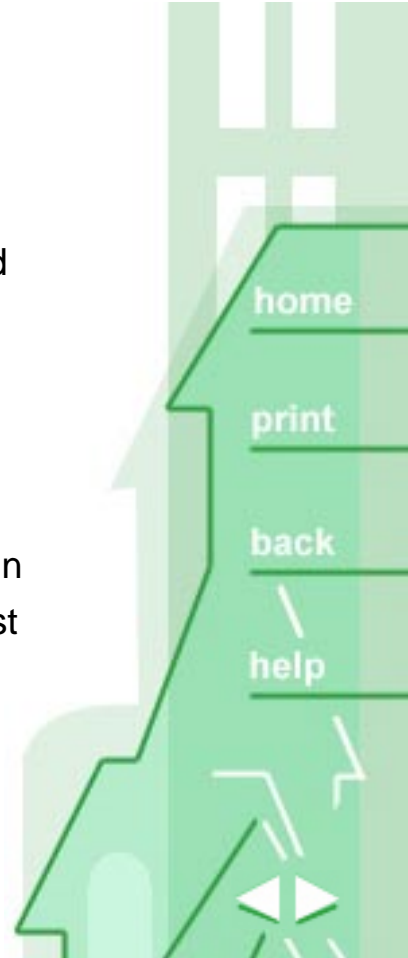
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Possible Causes?

It was suggested by the recent OFSTED report that factors contributing to the low achievement of the particular groups include:

- a lack of monitoring of initiatives aimed at raising attainment

- poor implementation and monitoring of equal opportunities policies in relation to ethnicity

- schools rarely use ethnic monitoring as part of their strategies to raise attainment levels

- schools are failing to ensure strategies for raising achievement aimed at helping specific groups improve their achievement. Moreover, few schools have developed strategies which are sensitive to the various ethnic groups

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Significantly the report highlights institutional failings rather than placing the emphasis on cultural deprivation.

It also recognises that schools which have developed targeted strategies (challenging the stereotyping and hostility often faced by pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds) have been able to significantly raise the achievement, self-esteem and confidence of these pupils.

The Institute of Race Relations has indicated the problem of the disproportionate amount of exclusions amongst boys from African-Caribbean backgrounds: although only comprising 2% of the school population they represent 8.1% of all those expelled.

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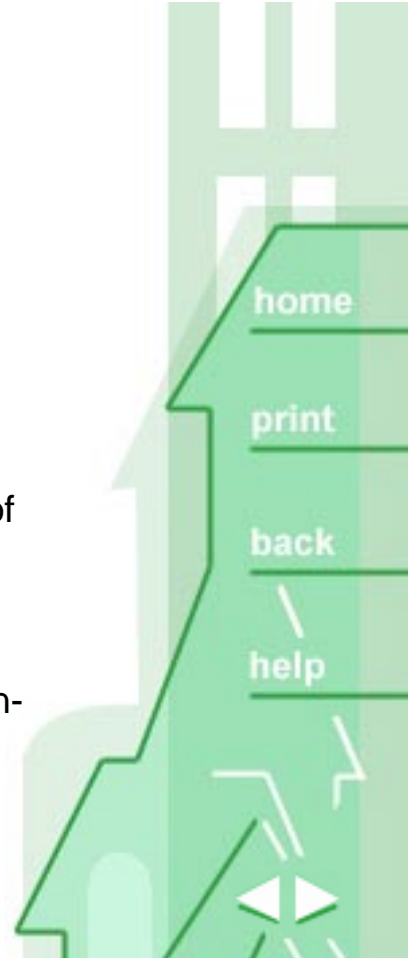
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A report produced by the London Borough of Camden in 1996 suggested that black pupils were ten times more likely to get expelled than white pupils.

The Institute of Race Relations has suggested that changes in education legislation, since the Education Reform Act (1988), have had a negative impact on ethnic minority children in a number of ways, including:

- Head teachers can discriminate in terms of pupil selection: schools now have to compete for pupils, so some may pander to majority parental prejudice
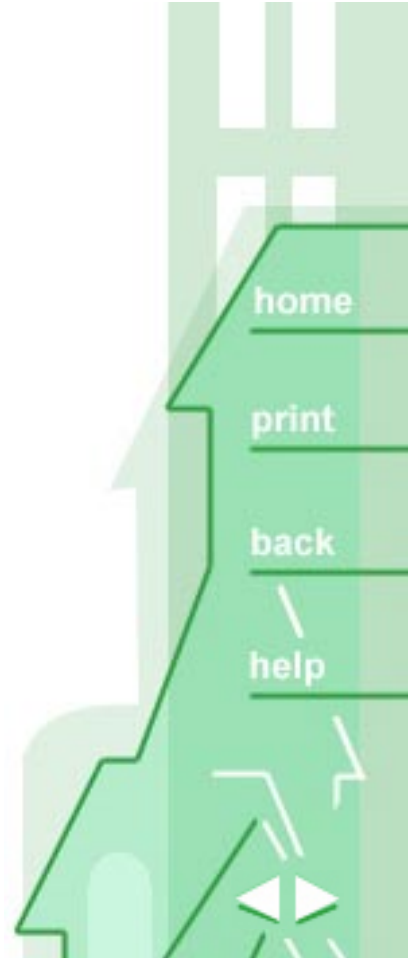
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- Schools are now spending less on support services: it is cheaper to exclude children rather than trying to sort out difficulties

- Greater demands on teachers may have led to them being more stressed and generally less tolerant in the classroom

- The National Curriculum's emphasis on 'white' history and culture has overridden previous multi-cultural approaches to education

A study which focused on inequalities within the education system and their impact on the achievement of children from ethnic minority communities (Gore 1997), identified low expectations amongst individual teachers, and within whole school institutions, as a cause for great concern.

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Activity 1

ITEM A   **Percentage of 16–24 Age Group in Education**
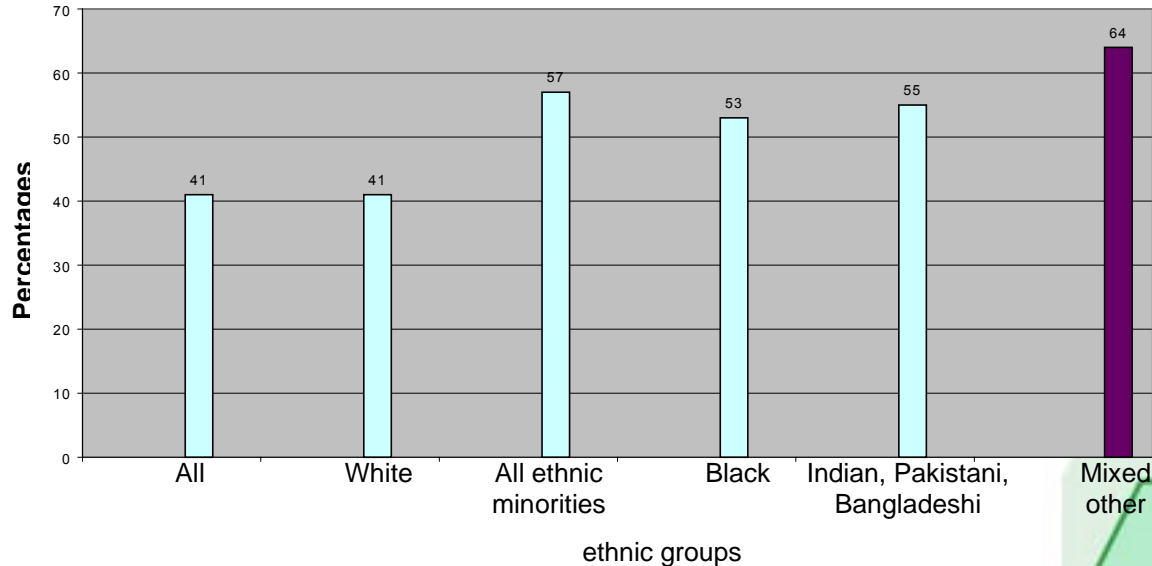
Source: DFEE Labour Market and Skill Trends 1997/98 © Crown copyright is reproduced
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What is the relationship between ethnicity and retention within post-compulsory education?

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Item B

Highest qualification held: by gender and ethnic group

	MALES	Higher	Other	None	FEMALES	Higher	Other	None
Black		20	64	16		21	63	16
White		22	64	15		20	60	20
Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi		23	55	22		14	54	33
Other (inc. ethnicity not given)		25	59	15		14	54	33

Qualification
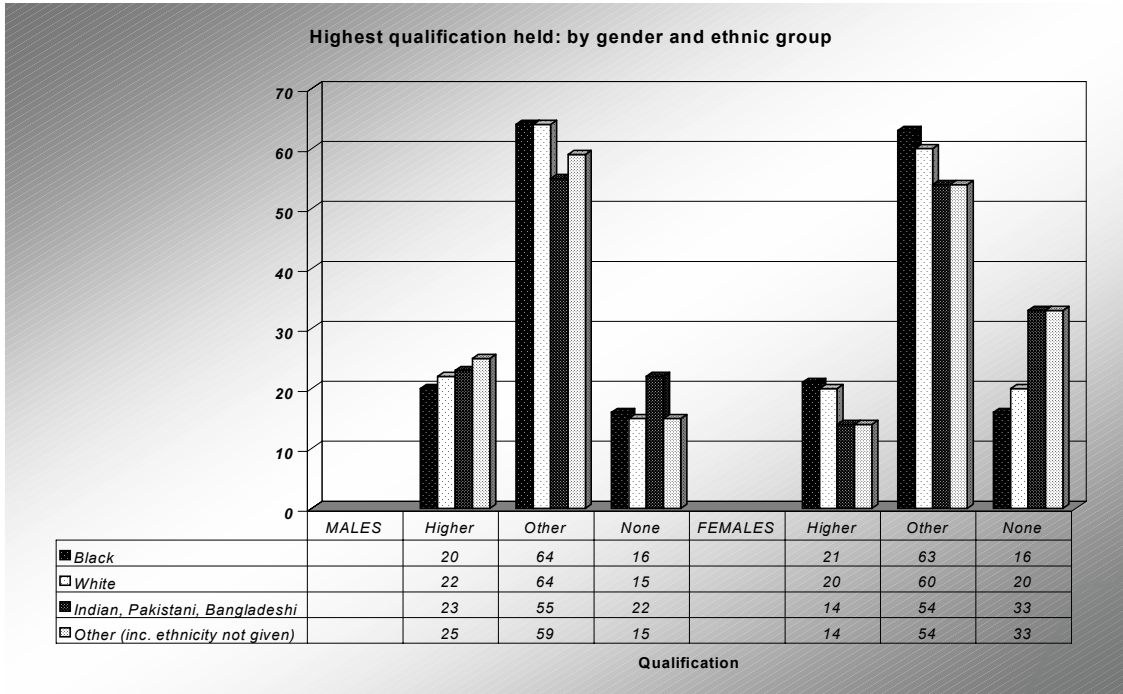
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Identify the main differences of educational achievement among ethnic minorities – with particular reference to gender differentials.
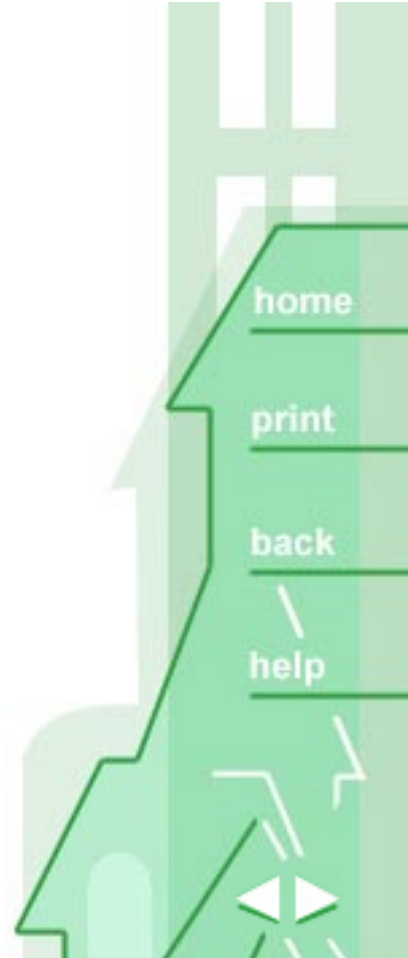
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Evidence suggests that West Indian girls do better than their male counterparts, especially in reading, and so the major concern is with West Indians boys.

Different theorists have attempted various explanations including:

- class position
- cultural deprivation
- historical legacies
- low self-esteem
- lower intelligence

Professor Halsey suggests that such under-achievement owes more to the class disadvantaged position, and working class under-achievement has long persisted in the British education system.
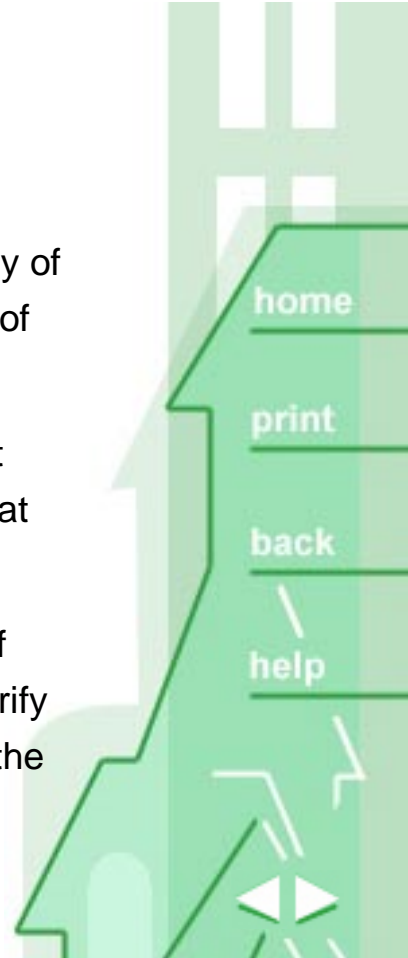
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There is further argument and debate within sociology that Asian children have accepted the middle class aspirations and meritocracy of Britain, whereas West Indians have rejected these norms in favour of their own culture.

Marxists have disagreed, preferring the argument that the Capitalist system is designed to reproduce the young black worker as labour at the lowest end of the production system.

Because of the very complex nature of this topic and the plethora of opinion surrounding a sensitive area of debate – let's attempt to clarify the issues involved by positing three main areas of explanation for the achievement of ethnic pupils.
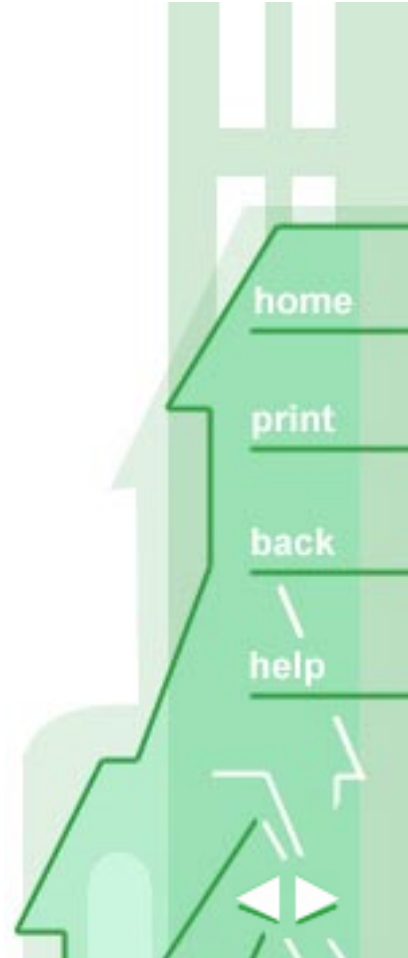
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Click on each of the headings in turn for these three main areas of explanation:

1   *Psychological School of Thought*

2   *The Environmental Aspect*

3   *The Educational System*

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THE IMPACT OF POST-STRUCTURALISM ON THEORIES OF EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT

Post-structuralism is a relatively recent sociological perspective. It is sometimes used interchangeably with the term Post-modernism. Post-modernism describes a movement which has been transforming architecture, the arts and sciences (and impacting on sociology through post-structuralist ideas) since the 1970s.

Post-modernist theory is critical of macro-theories, which attempt to isolate a singular 'truth' or cause. Post-modernists advocate plural and relative causes for phenomena: highlighting the dynamic interplay between various factors involved in any issue.

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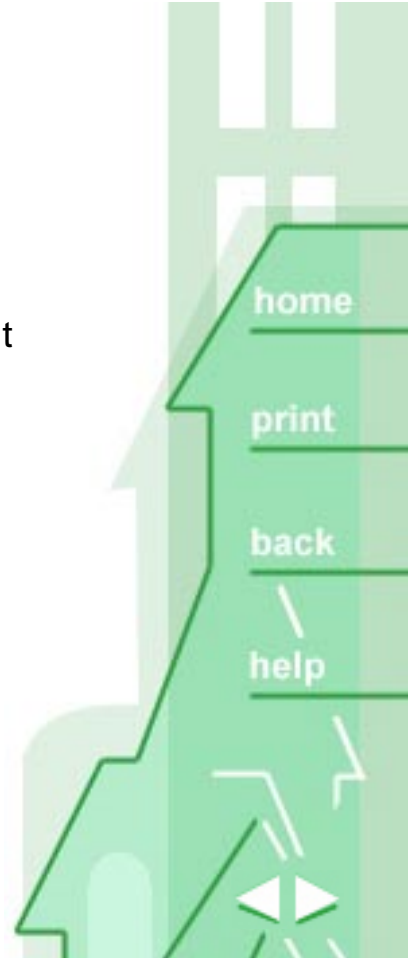
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THE INFLUENCE OF FOUCAULT

The work of the French historian/philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-84) is central to the perspective of post-structuralism. Foucault argued that our lives, thoughts and actions are shaped according to the ways in which ideas, particular ways of understanding things, and knowledge about social phenomena, are organised: he called this organisation of ideas **Discourse**.

Foucault suggested that over time discourses become forms of knowledge which have the power to compel us to think and act in certain ways. Rather unnervingly, but quite compellingly, Foucault argued that our own individualities, our identities, are produced through **Discourse**.
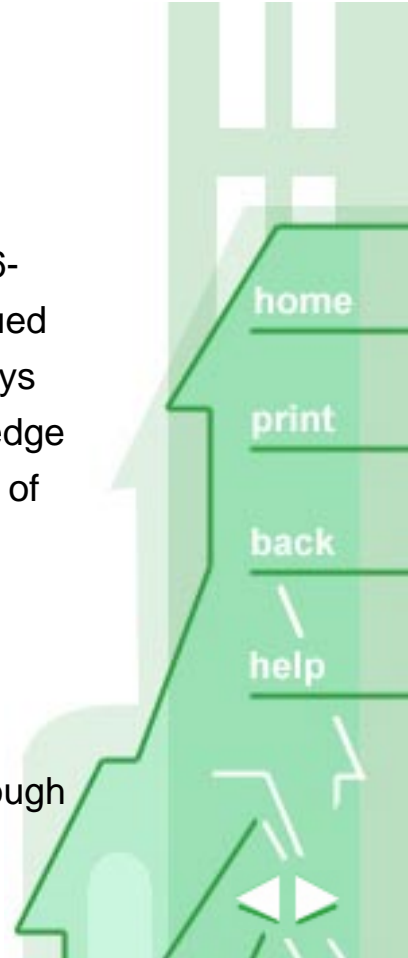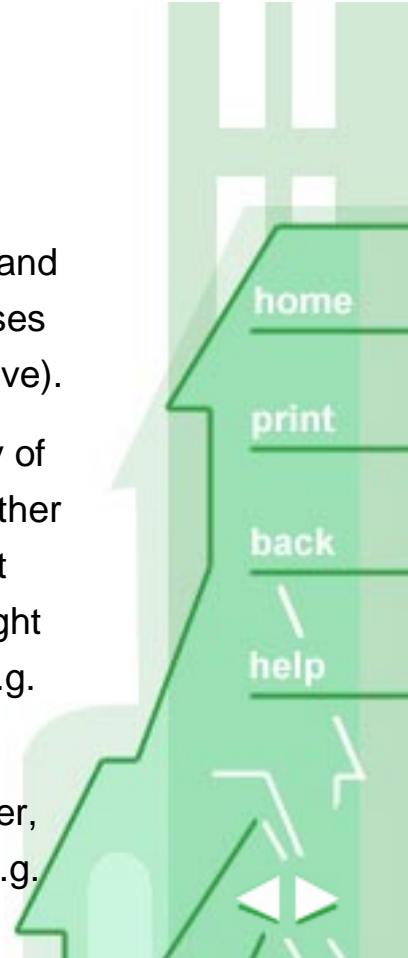
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He suggested that the ways in which knowledge is organised and promoted is more significant than the possibility of essential 'truth': and is always culturally and historically specific (i.e. the various discourses that shape our lives are specific to the time and place in which we live).

Foucault's work has become increasingly important in the sociology of education. Rather than identifying the experience of one group or other as being the result of a singular causative factor, a post-structuralist approach will seek to identify and locate the various factors that might be impacting on a particular group (or sub-group within a group – e.g. boys from an African-Caribbean background).

The dynamics of power were a central concern to Foucault. However, he contested Marx's idea that power comes from a single source (e.g. the ruling-class).
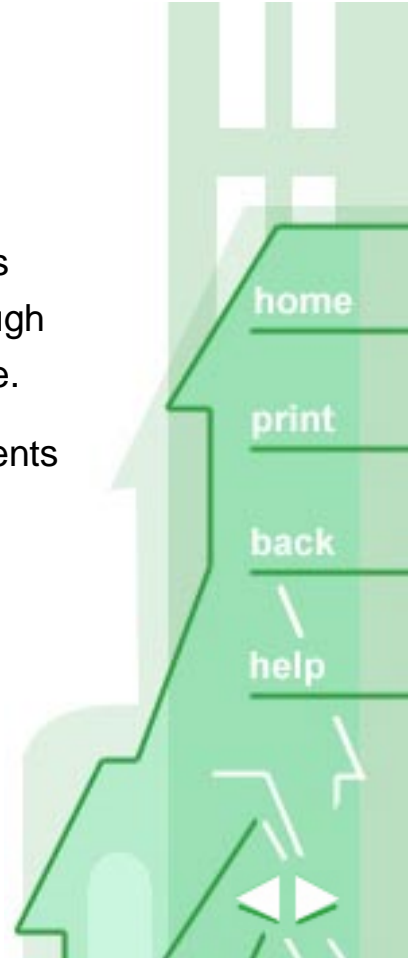
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He argued that the dynamics of power exist and are present in all social relations, and at all levels of society. The 'lads' in Paul Willis's study provide an illustration of Foucault's conception of power through their active resistance to the authoritarianism of the school structure.

The African-Caribbean supplementary school system, in which parents with children from African-Caribbean backgrounds seek to redress some of the inequalities in the mainstream education system, also reflects Foucault's conception of power.

Rather than acting as passive victims of institutional and societal 'oppression' strategies have been developed that seek to address inequality.
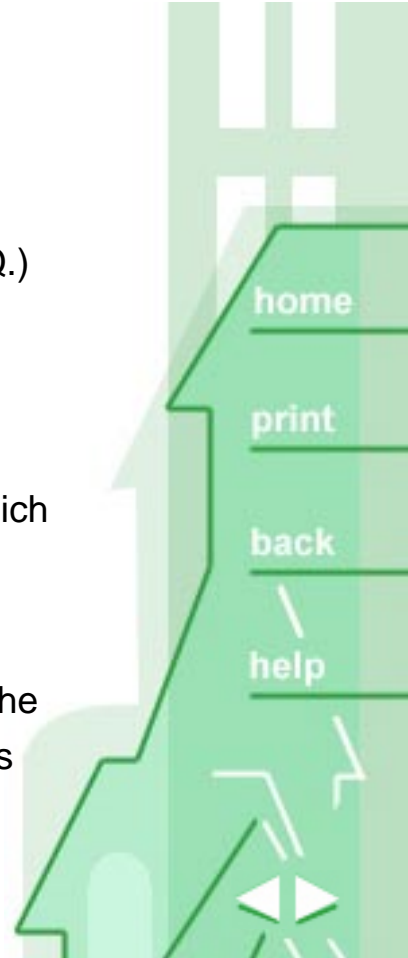
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From a post-structuralist perspective it could also be argued that theories of intelligence (and the testing that purports to measure I.Q.) are socially constructed discourses, rather than being rooted in biologically determined phenomena.

The relatively recent greater educational achievement of girls, compared to boys, can also be looked at in terms of the ways in which discourses of femininity (i.e. what it means to be a girl and woman) have changed over recent decades.

Shaped through the impact of feminist discourses (feminism), and the shifts and changes in economic and social discourses (i.e. the ideas we have about work and who is eligible to fill different work roles, in relation to the changing demands of contemporary capitalist economies).
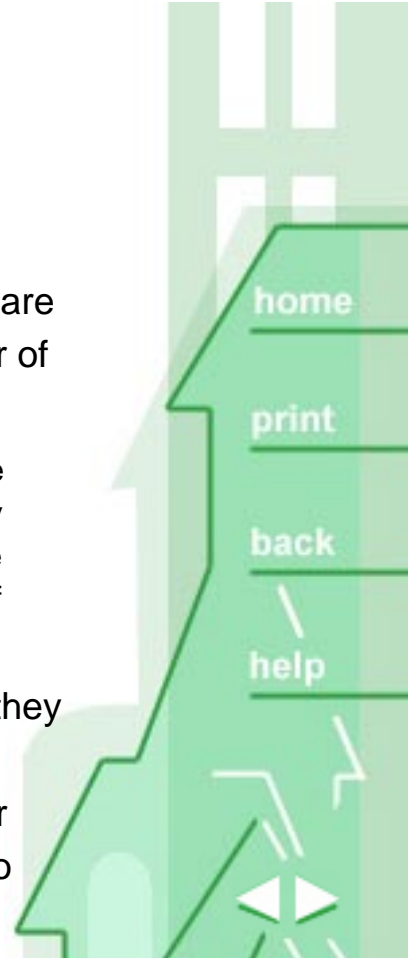
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Frogs and Snails and Feminist Tails: Pre-School Children and Gender (Davies 1989)

In her study of the ways in which masculine and feminine identities are constructed within the educational process, Davies argues in favour of a post-structuralist perspective:

> 'If we see society as being constantly created through discursive practices then it is possible to see the power of those practices not only to create and sustain the social world but also to see how we can change that world through the refusal of certain discourses and the generation of new ones.'

Critics of post-structuralism and post-modernism have argued that they are essentially neo-conservative, encouraging apathy. If we are constructed as individuals through discourse (i.e. with no free will or essential 'self'), and if power is so fluid and diffuse it is impossible to clearly locate and pin down, what is the point of political struggle?

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However, post-structuralism and post-modernism are better approached as ways of looking at things rather than as solutions in themselves. Whilst Foucault did criticise Marx's ideas he was certainly not an advocate of apathy and complacency.

Activity 2

It is important that you understand the meaning and usage of new terms and concepts that you encounter. Prepare a glossary of the following:

- I.Q.

- Social Mobility

- Educational Priority Area (EPA)

- Compensatory Education

- Cultural Deprivation

- Elaborated/Restricted Codes of Speech
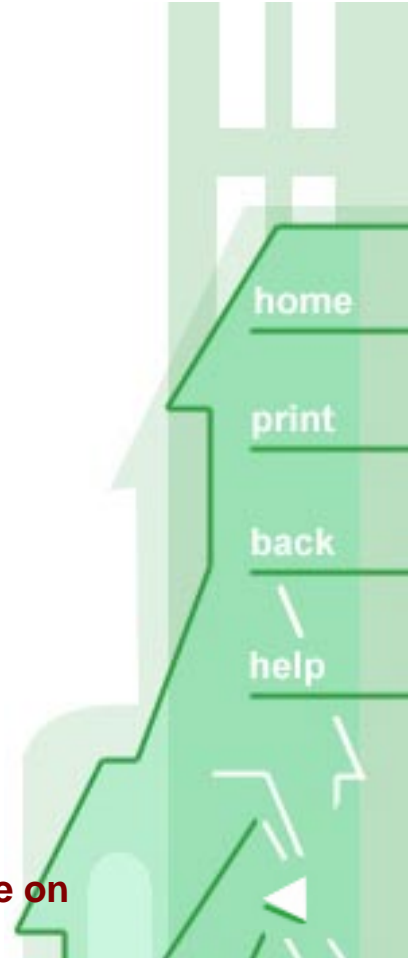
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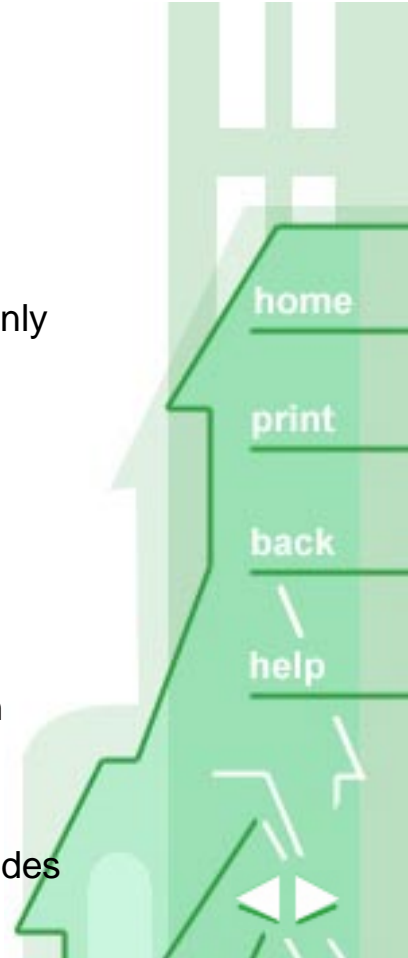
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- Labelling of Pupils

- Self-fulfilling Prophecy

- Gender Role

- Sex-Role Stereotyping

- Educational Performance

- Multi-Cultural Education

- Post-modernism/Post-structuralism

You may have some of your own to add to the list.

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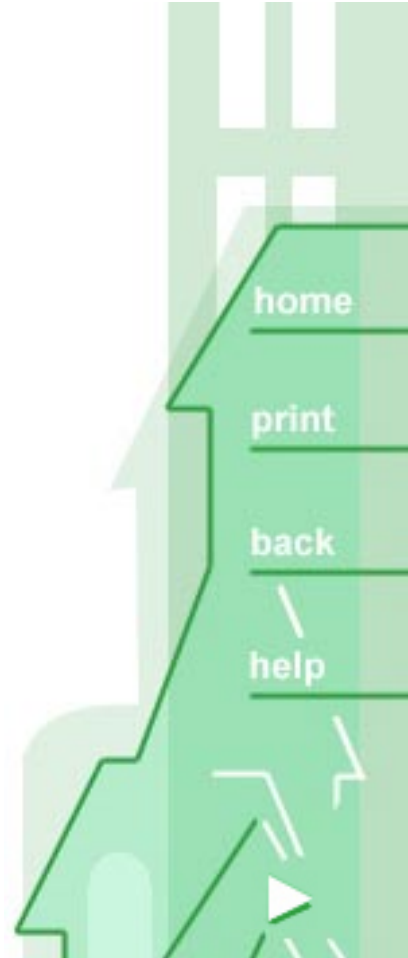# Ethnic Factors Affecting Achievement in Education

PSYCHOLOGICAL SCHOOL OF THOUGHT

The first explanation comes from the psychological school of thought who prefer a biological explanation: this addresses the question of innate intelligence. Both Jensen & Eysenck and subsequently Herrnstein and Murray argue that intelligence is hereditary.

I.Q. testing in the USA, resulted in whites scoring 15 points higher than blacks.

No environmental factors could account for the discrepancy – so they concluded:

Blacks must be **less** intelligent than whites.

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This theory has obviously been seriously criticised. I.Q. testing itself is suspect on several grounds.

- There is a definite critical difference between environment in black and white America

- I.Q. tests are subjective. Set by particular groups FOR particular groups so NOT objective

- Clever parents have under-achieving offspring and vice-versa.(disproves genetic evidence)

- I.Q. scores are only partially correlated with educational achievement. For example: some LOW achievers in education have shown high scores/vice-versa
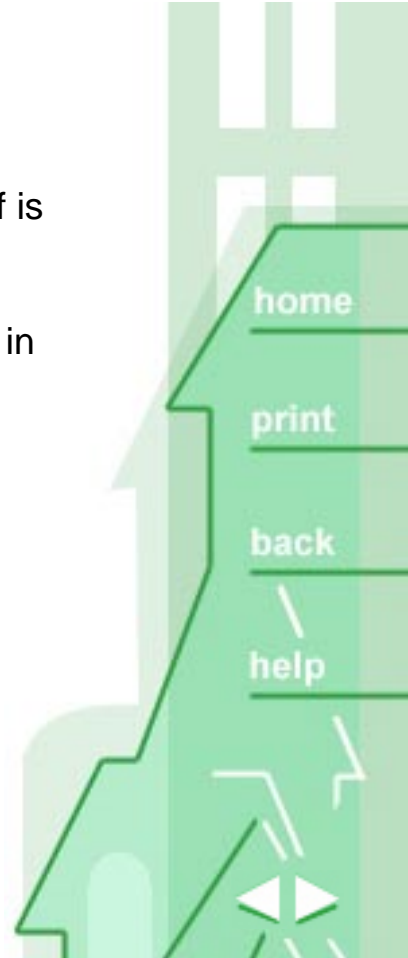
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There are two sides to the argument regarding intelligence and ethnicity, known as the Nature and Nurture debate.

Those, such as Eysenck and Jensen (1969) believe that:

- intelligence is   80% inherited
                        20% environment

- blacks therefore are genetically deficient and so should receive a different education than whites (known as the nature side of the debate)

This is disputed by Tyler, an American psychologist, who argues:

- if blacks were genetically different then all their I.Q. scores would be low
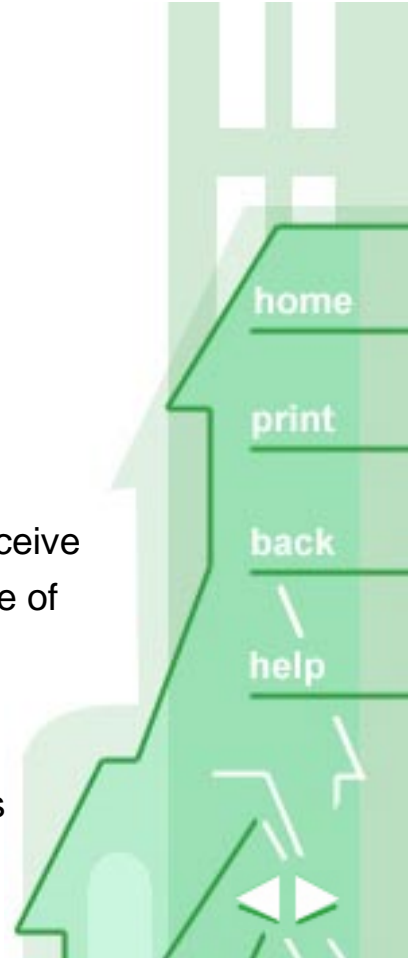
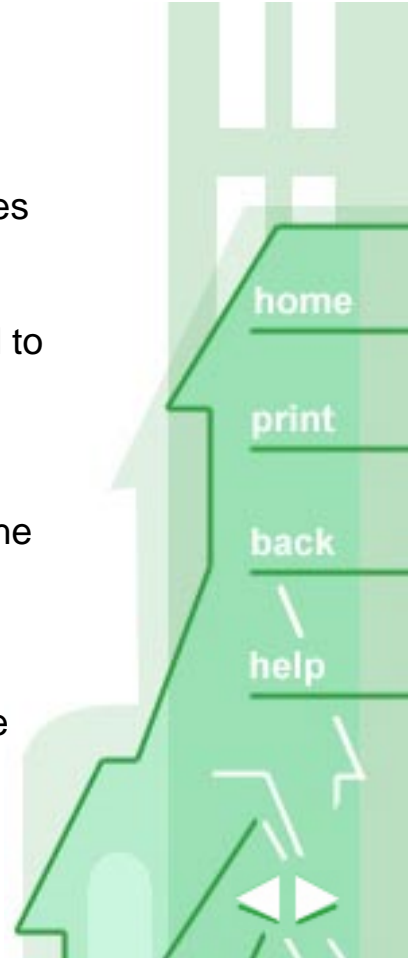# Ethnic Factors Affecting Achievement in Education

- his research showed that blacks living in the northern states had higher I.Q.'s than those in southern states

- black southern americans who migrated north, were found to improve their I.Q. results

Tyler concluded from this evidence that environmental factors were more influential to intelligence than genetic inheritance (known as the nurture side of the debate).

Evaluate the arguments put forward by the nature-nurture debate, concerning the under-achievements of ethnic minorities. Assess the strengths and weaknesses of both sides of the debate. Aim for 300 words and hand it to your tutor for marking.

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In a study of Race Relations in Britain (1984) Pilkington offered an explanation for the presence of genetic arguments.

He argues that during the 50's and 60's there was a period of relative affluence and expansion in education.

It was believed that this would remove many of the iniquities of the system that were detrimental to blacks.

However, recent slowing down of the economy and increasing financial constraints have removed the liberal consensus (see Unit 1).

Inequalitites were therefore not removed, and so there was a return to the lame, inadequate explanations such as the genetic debate. Pilkington believes this returns to old fashioned scapegoating – blaming the VICTIM.

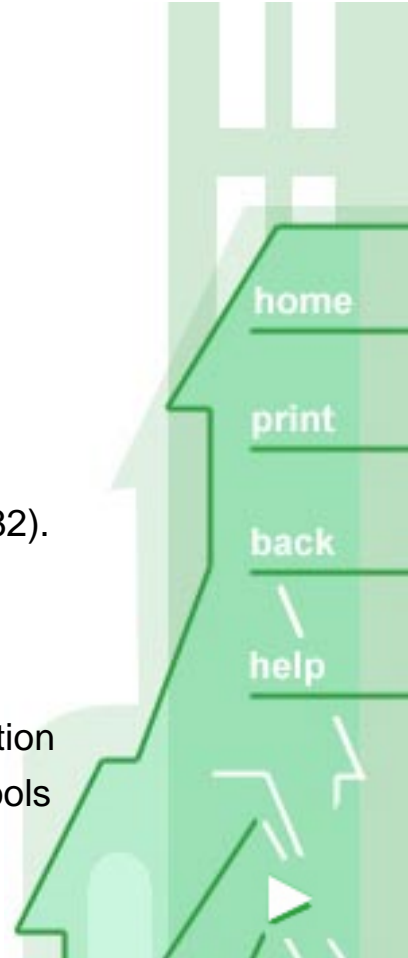# Ethnic Factors Affecting Achievement in Education

THE ENVIRONMENTAL ASPECT

The second area of debate that we shall examine is environmental. The cultural background of West Indian history has been the site of much enquiry. Whereas the Asian culture easily (relatively) took up British educational aspirations – West Indians did not.

This has been explained historically by British Imperialism (Rex 1982).

The strong close-knit families of the Asian communities were not disrupted by British Colonial rule.

Because they were able to maintain their particular norms of obligation to kin and community – their children are able to attend British schools whilst they retain their own ethnic identity and status.

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In contrast, British rule of the West Indies meant the subordination of culture through slavery (similar to Black Americans).

They lost more than their freedom. According to Rex, they lost:

Culture   *Language*   *Family system*   *Religion*

In the West Indies a common family form among the working class peasantry is that of **Common-Law Association**.

This results in a matrilineal society due to unstable relationships which leave mother to care for children alone.

Whatever the truth of these explanations may be, relations among West Indian families are less clearly defined than those of Asian origin.

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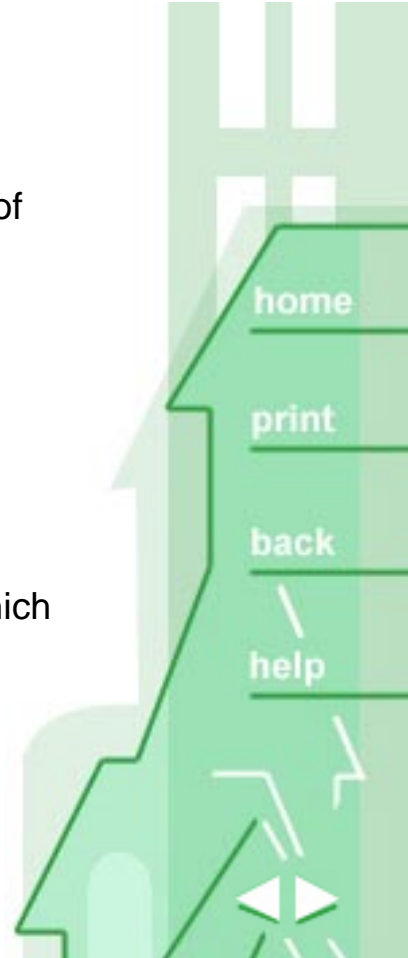
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The children are less secure and have less identity feelings. Many preferring to value Western/European features of society, thus giving themselves a negative image. (Rastafarians do manage to retain self-identity).

According to Taylor (1982), West Indian parents were seen to be concerned about their children's development at school, but did not recognise the value and importance of play – toys – communication – parent/child interaction in the **formative** years of life.

There was also a tendency to be strictly disciplinarian. Most of the parents had themselves experienced traditional teaching with authoritarian methods. This helps to explain their current preference for rote learning and formal teaching.
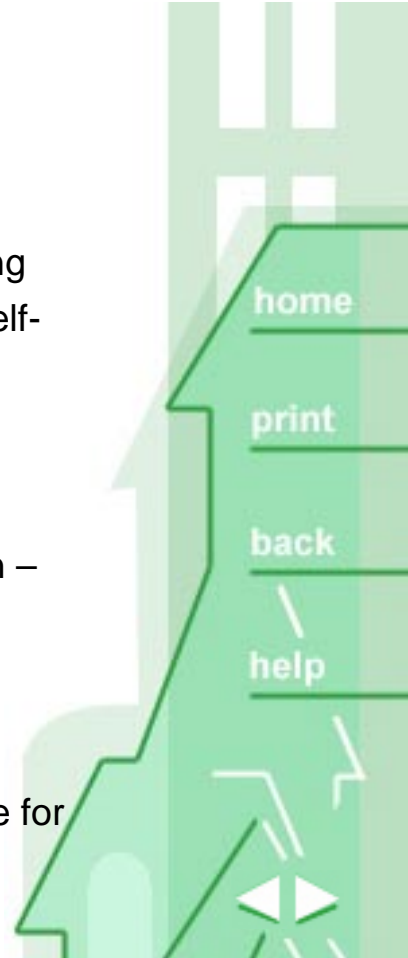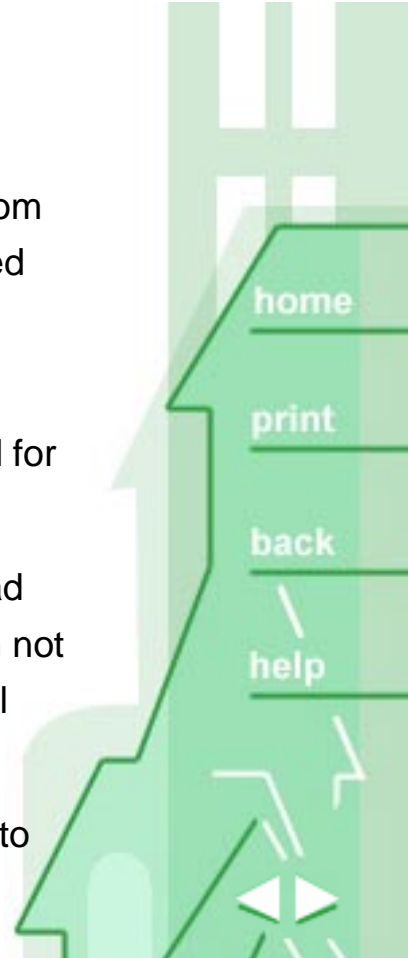
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West Indian immigrants picture of education will be very different from that of their own children. Changes in the British system have moved from strict-through liberal in the time since West Indian immigration took place in the mid-fifties.

The new National Curriculum may well prove to be a testing ground for West Indian children.

Foner in 1979 also found that a high proportion of single parents had resorted to using child-minders in order to remain at work. Although not always detrimental, child-minding was seen as inferior to pre-school family care.

It can be seen that evidence from sociologists has gone some way to explain the under-achievements of ethnic minorities.

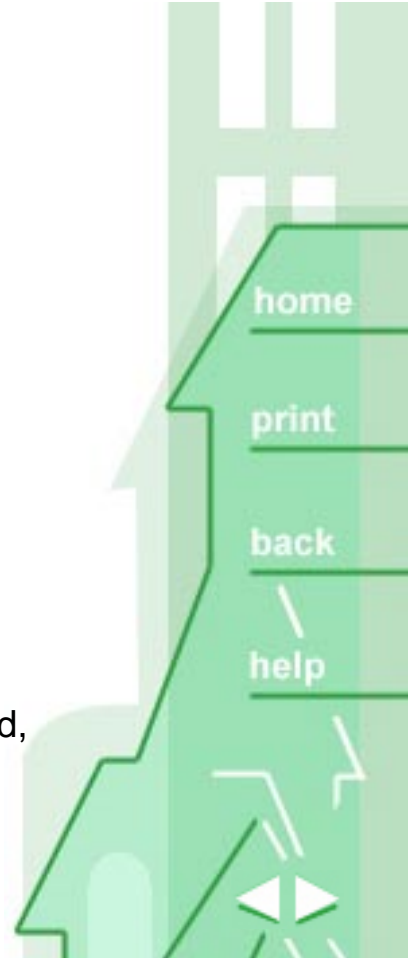# Ethnic Factors Affecting Achievement in Education

A combination of:

- different child-rearing practices

- material deprivation (single parent poverty)

- low paid employment

- break-up of the extended family

- the low expectations of teachers and schools

All can inevitably lead to a CYCLE of under-achievement.

Further evidence that environmental/cultural explanations were valid, came from two influential studies.

The Coleman Report USA (1966)

The Plowden Report UK (1967)

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Both argued that:

What children brought with them to school (culturally) – seriously affected their educational potential and achievement. Pre-school factors were seen as extremely significant and this became known as:

CULTURAL DEPRIVATION

Click here to print out a Self Assessment table to complete according to the views expressed by various authors

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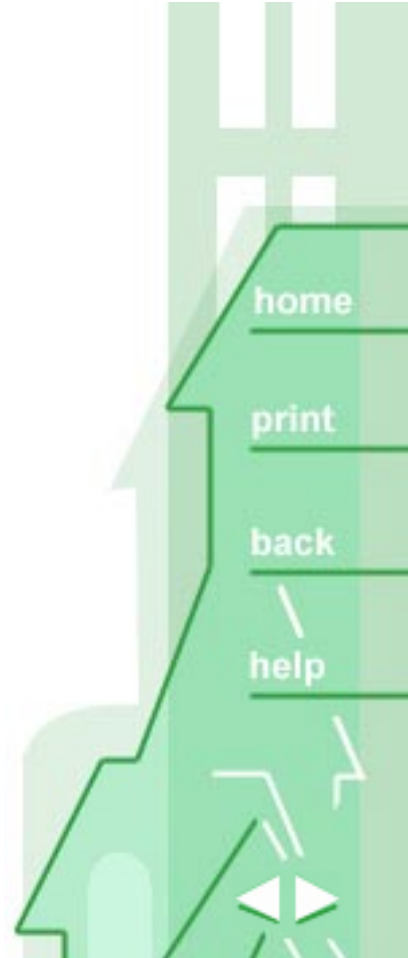
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Criticism of Cultural Deprivation Theory

- This view labels some children failures before they arrive at schools

- The deficiency is blamed on inadequate culture

- To correct this deficiency, interference in pre-school is necessary

Various ideas have been given:

Language therapy as minority groups are linguistically deprived.

This is hotly disputed by Labov who argues that dialect is **different** from RP (received pronunciation/standard English) not **inferior**. Minority group language can be Subtle – Logical – Expressive and Rich.

To show/believe that it is somehow **incorrect** is to show **cultural bias**. It places English as superior to other languages.
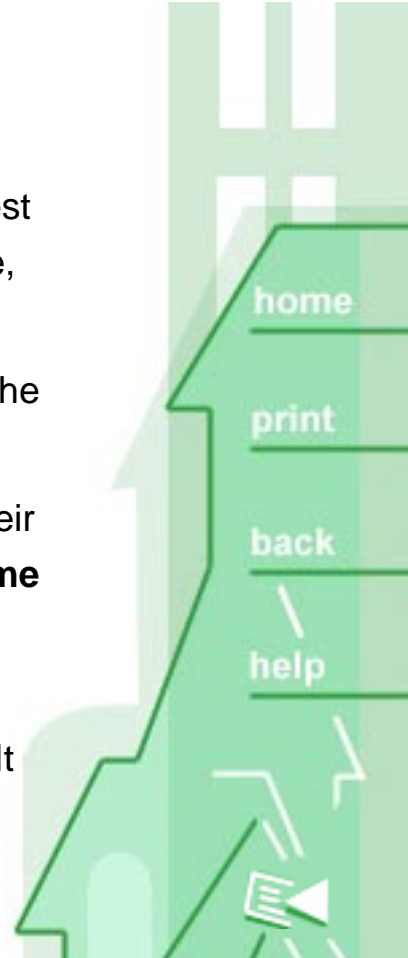
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Lawrence believes that far from being **culturally** deprived – the West Indians have developed a distinctive culture which retains language, religion and family systems with African elements.

They have a strong sense **of identity** and a joy and celebration of the Afro-caribbean culture.

To suggest the failure of West Indian children at school is due to their **own** culture and home background is to be racist as it puts the **blame** within the community itself. This denies self-identification.

Cultural Deprivation Theory fails to address the ways in which the education system reflects inequalities existing in the wider society. It also fails to identify the existence of institutional racism within the education system, and the incidence and effects of racist attitudes expressed by individual teachers.

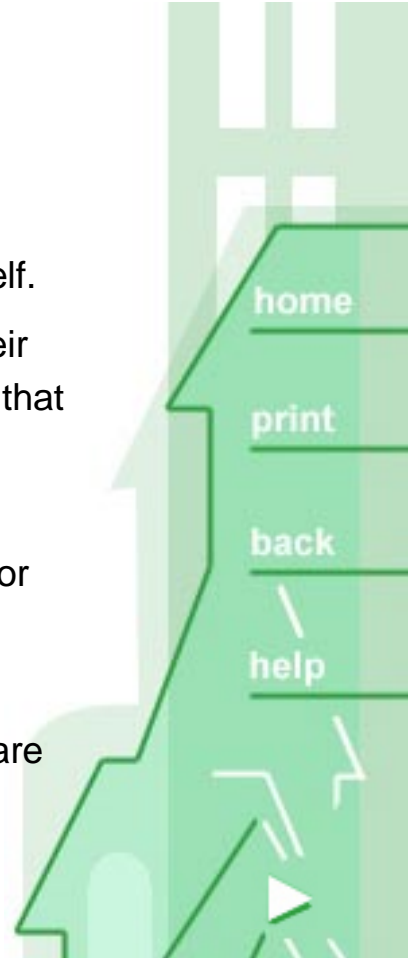# Ethnic Factors Affecting Achievement in Education

THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

This third area of the debate focuses on the educational system itself.

Although West Indians did have a more severe fragmentation of their culture than that of Asian immigrants, it does not necessarily follow that parents/culture are to blame.

The socialisation they receive may not be conducive to the British Education system, but there is a further dimension to this problem for ethnic minorities. They also have to adjust to racial discrimination which white children do not.

The material/environmental/employment disadvantages they have are compounded by the racist dimension. This will obviously lead to pressures in many facets of life for black children. Hardly surprising then that they under-achieve at school.

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Many sociologists believe that it is the role of the education system itself to become more active in combating under-achievement by ethnic minority children.

One is Jeffcoate who argued for multi-cultural education as a solution to the problem.
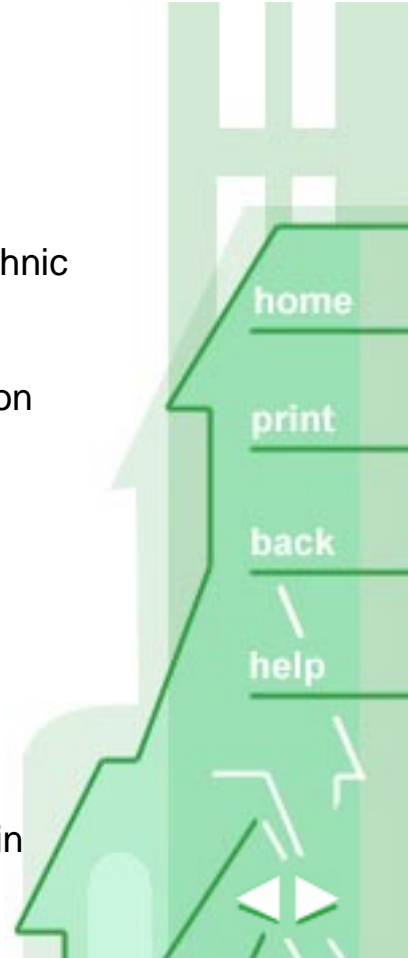
Changes in the curriculum were required.

There is controversy of the actual meaning of the term:

MULTI-CULTURAL EDUCATION

In other words – what does it involve?

It is an umbrella term which covers a variety of approved practices in schools.

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For example:

Mother-tongue teaching
Ethnic school dinners
*Elimination of ethnocentricity in History*
Elimination of racial bias in books
Inclusion of non-racial religions
Employment of teachers of ethnic origin

There has been some commitment to multi-cultural education but recent educational reforms (see Unit 3) have posed problems for schools with large numbers of ethnic minority children.

Such schools are set to figure low on the Compulsory League Tables unless extra resources are made available. During the current economic climate it seems highly unlikely.

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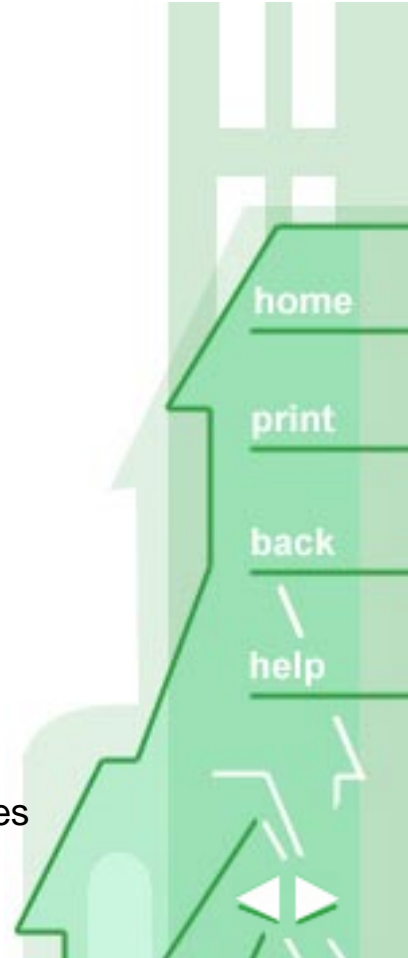
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Maureen Stone (1981) is a severe critic of Multi-Cultural Education (MCE). She is committed to the improvement of education but does not believe MCE to be the answer.

Stone argues that under-achievement of black children is based in the child's own low self-esteem or negative concept.

This results in:

Low motivation

Lack of confidence

Poor self-image
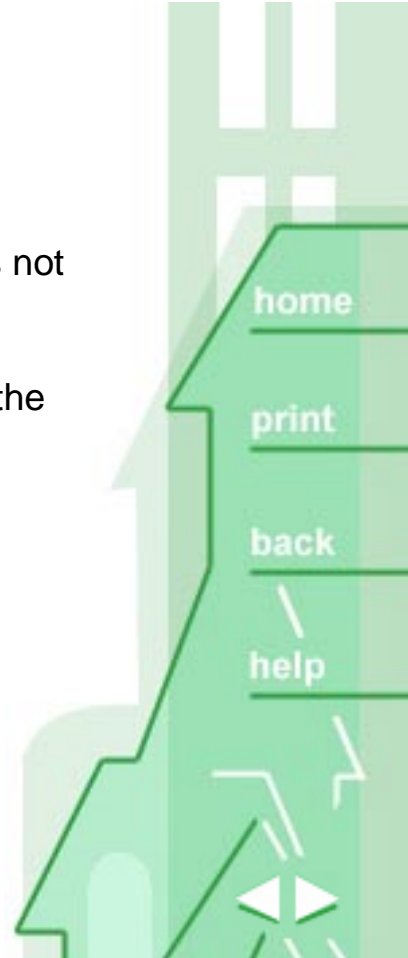
Ethnic Factors Affecting Achievement in Education

The term preferred by Stone is

<p align="center">**MULTI-RACIAL EDUCATION**</p>

MRE

This would present a more **positive** image for black people.

There should be an introduction of black studies into the curriculum.

For example, the inclusion of **creole** as an option (W.I. Dialect) or history lessons of West Africa, West Indies.

QUOTE

> I want to suggest that MCE is conceptually unsound, that it's theoretical and practical implications have not been worked out and that it develops features of urban education aimed at 'watering down' the curriculum and 'cooling out' black city children.'
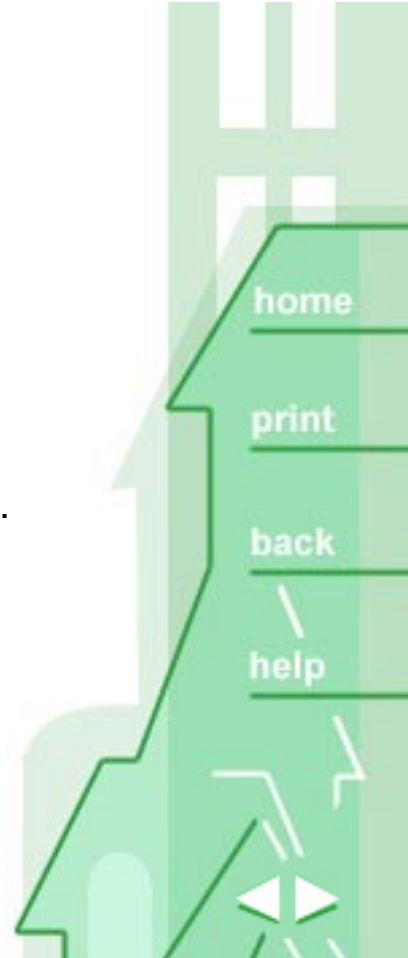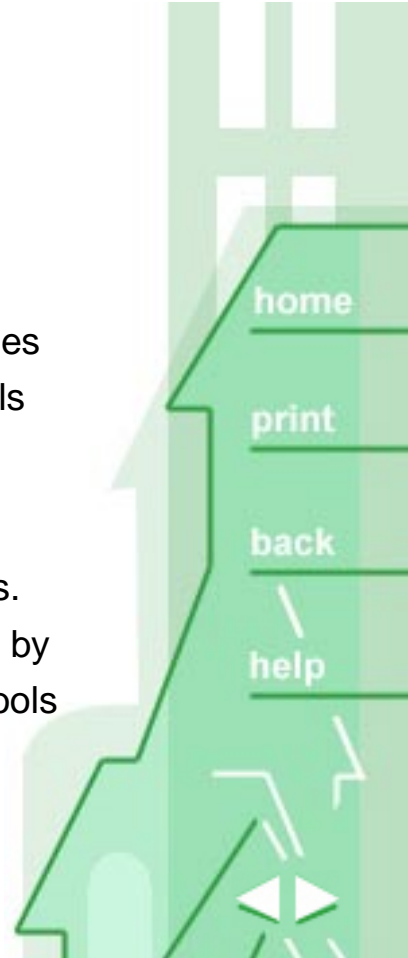
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In her study of 264 West Indian origin children, she finds very little evidence of low self-esteem.

She therefore feels that MCE may be a diversionary tactic which uses time and skill which would be better served /used to learn basic skills and knowledge.

She argues, the basic reason for the low attainment of West Indian children is their class position. Many live in deprived inner city areas. Her own solution is the establishment of Saturday schools provided by the community themselves to give the basic skills that ordinary schools do not provide.

Further important studies on the vexed question present a similar critique of multi cultural education.

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Hazel Corby looks at educational policies aimed at assimilation and integration from the 60's to the 80's. Such policies have become so detrimental that black children in the 80's have become 'Special Needs' pupils.

1968–9 the House of Commons Select Committee on Race Relations set in motion the education policies that led to MCE. Black history then became what white schools said it was. This was not an awareness exercise designed to fight oppression – to raise black consciousness of their past – to fight against an unjust racist society.

Corby sees it instead as an attempt to ignore:

'the social relations of power that sustained institutionalised racism, which are reproduced in the classroom'.

In other words: 'I like you, even though you are black'.

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Killian and Kirp are not as polemical as Corby but feel that other methods should be tried.

Bussing

This is the dispersal of minority pupils to give a better ethnic balance. This ensures that no one school has more than one third ethnic pupils.

They agree that all such ideas are similar that is Bussing/MCE and are all aimed at **integration** through education.

The Department of Education & Science has left the whole issue in the hands of the Local Education Authorities. This denotes a lack of cohesive national policy to date (for update see Unit 3).

The final word in the debate comes from **troyna** who believes that government reluctance is grounded in the assimilation model.
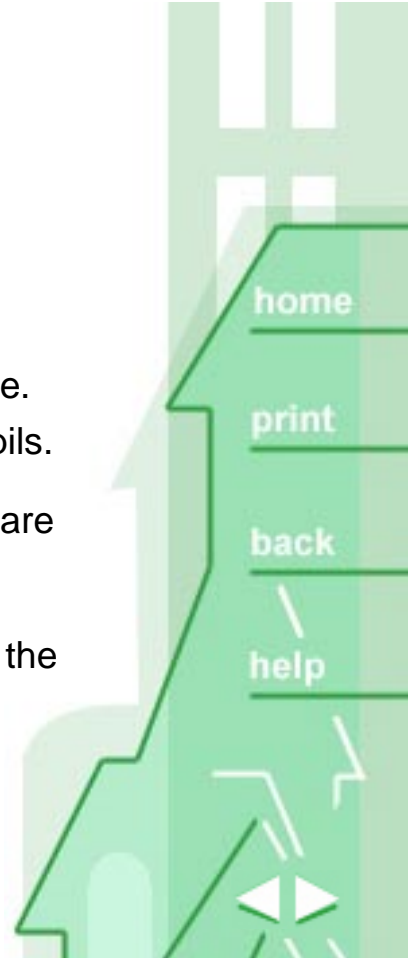
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In other words – the best thing for blacks is to become white thinking.

The focus of attention has now moved from sociological analysis to political rhetoric.

The new National Curriculum (1988 Act) has taken away many of the arguments for the under-achievement of ethnic minority children.

All children – regardless of colour/creed/ethnic origin/culture/class – will compulsorily learn white history, language and cultural imperatives of the dominant group in society.

A recent study of black supplementary schools in London (Mirza 1997) identifies the ways in which minority communities are pro-actively attempting to challenge the failings of mainstream education provision by developing their own supplementary provision.