5

Through students’ eyes

Interviews I have conducted with black students in a variety of secondary schools across England have confirmed that they feel a great deal of confusion and rage about their schooling, their prospects, and the way they are positioned in society. They are fully aware that education is necessary and important but they are demoralised by a school system which denies them recognition through the curriculum, undermines their sense of self, appears indifferent to their needs, makes learning meaningless and is so intent on controlling them that that they find little to distinguish between schools and detention centres. If schooling was difficult enough in primary school, in the secondary sector it is an obstacle course. Black males in particular see the high levels of unemployment of black men around them and are not inspired by the promise of a better life if they would but conform to a schooling system which marginalises and alienates them, even as it attempts to seduce them with these promises.

All students need more reason to be in school than simply the promise of jobs. What they learn must have some relevance to their personal lives as well as to the world for which they are being prepared. Discipline is a problem because students feel that school is about neither of these things, and the more marginalised they feel, the more irrelevant the whole business of school seems to be. The failure to bring the structure of schooling into the twenty-first century and to define the role of schools in a manner which has meaning for young people, has left them vulnerable to the more seductive attraction offered by the advertising industry, the addictions of con-
sumerism and to many of the dangerous messages coming from films and television (Postman, 1996). A growing sector of the nation’s young people is not only alienated from school but finding itself excluded from education because, in the shift from a focus on students to a focus on economic concerns, schools cannot find ways to engage with their needs and concerns. The arena is well prepared for the creation of oppositional cultures and for schools to be, perhaps more than ever before, sites of struggle.

Problems created for black students

Many of the difficulties faced by black students are also faced by white (especially working class) students, for the reasons discussed above. Over and above these common experiences, racism was keenly felt by black students. Whilst race was often seen as having a dynamic of its own, social class and gender were seldom recognised or identified as areas of major concern for black students except where, as for example in the experience of black boys, race and gender were seen to be obviously interlinking factors. Fewer girls than boys were interviewed, but these girls identified racism as the most destructive factor in their school lives. A study focusing on how black girls are affected by disciplinary exclusions in school is pressing.

The way forward for schools is to listen to the concerns of students, engage with them and try to resolve them. One of the major problems faced by minority ethnic group students has been not so much blatant racism as liberal complacency and indifference. The majority of teachers are not out-and-out racists, yet this vast body of professionally committed people has allowed the status quo to prevail against the interests of students. In order to resolve the problems of academic failure or underachievement and exclusion, educators need to put aside their defensive stance and the tendency to look outwards for solutions to problems. If schools genuinely want to provide equitable education for their minority ethnic students, they must be prepared to do things differently. In discussions with students about exclusions a number of themes emerged.
Unfair treatment
Several studies in Britain have found that black students are subject to unfair treatment in schools. In his study, Gillborn (1990) observed that teachers used different rules for assessing the behaviours of different groups of students and that these rules were rooted in teachers’ racial perceptions of students. Similarly, studies by Wright (1987) and Connolly (1995) illustrated the differential ways in which teachers treated the black students in the early years of schooling, and this was supported by the studies carried out by Mortimore et al. (1988) and Tizard et al. (1988) both of whose focus was not race but who both concluded that black children were subject to less praise and more reprimands than children from other ethnic groups. Tizard et al. state,

In our interviews with the children, we observed that (black boys) received most disapproval and criticism from teachers, and they were most often said by teachers to have behaviour problems (p.181).

In his study of an infant school, Connolly (1995) argued that black children were constructed as problems by a combination of teacher stereotypes of black people and black men in particular, and the ambivalent attitudes of envy and admiration of their peers. Black boys were thus produced as ‘bad’ and were likely to be singled out or blamed for incidents in which they had taken no part. He gives a telling example of a boy who was blamed for whistling in class on a day when he was absent from school.

The idea that black children are criticised and reprimanded more because they behave worse than other children therefore needs to be re-examined. The findings of Connolly (1995), Gillborn (1990), Wright et al. (2000) and my own studies all suggest that there is indifference, lack of knowledge, and sometimes downright neglect of the educational needs of black students. Anyone wishing to understand the processes that go on in a classroom with black children should read the account by Wright (1992a) of a lesson involving one small black boy, Marcus (p.19-21).

In 1990 when I worked as an Advisory Teacher, I was asked to go to a primary school where a six-year old black boy was said to be
causing problems for his teacher. I spent two full days as an ‘assistant teacher’ in this classroom and what I observed was that, like the children in Wright’s study, this boy could not make the slightest move without the teacher noticing and calling him to order. He was the only black child in the classroom and was described by the teacher as so hyper-active that he took up more of her energy than any other child. She felt that he fidgeted during story time, she could hardly get him to sit down in the normal course of the day, and he either wanted to be first in line or else dragged his feet when they had to go to the hall to do PE. When I pointed out to her two children who were at least as – and one of them certainly more – active than the black child, she was surprised at her own perception. One of these boys was the black child’s best friend and I once witnessed this friend pulling him back so they both dawdled when they should have been going to the school hall. Yet the teacher had perceived the black child as the one who led his friend astray! But what made this boy especially vulnerable was that his behaviour was being interpreted as a characteristic of his race and therefore beyond the teacher’s ability to understand or deal with. Had he been seen as just another six year old child, she might have found nothing extraordinary about his behaviour and noted that several other children in the class behaved in much the same way. But even had he been more hyper-active than other children and problematically so, the Multicultural Service was hardly the place to seek help. It was the perception of his behaviour as symptomatic of a racial condition that led to our being called to intervene. His mother (who, as it happened, was white) had observed nothing abnormal about his level of energy.

Black students in secondary school may well have endured similar negative attention at primary school. They gave accounts of being picked on by teachers and thus of being more likely than white students to get into situations of conflict with teachers. Claims by students that they are picked on are common. Many children, from all ethnicities, will tell you that their teacher picks on them, usually adding, ‘for no reason’. However, in my interviews with white students, never did I come across one who felt that he or she was picked on because they were white – not even where the teacher in question was black.
Theorists of the self-fulfilling prophecy argue that teachers’ expectations invariably affect the way they relate to students. The student in turn reflects these expectations through his or her actions, thereby fulfilling the teacher’s original prophecy. When teachers have high expectations of students they respond positively and learning becomes a rewarding and challenging experience for them. However, if a teacher’s expectations undermine the student, it causes resentment and alienation and this leads to a negative experience for both teacher and student.

The widespread feeling among students that black students were more likely than white to be picked out for talking or other forms of disobedience in the classroom had a demoralising effect on black students and could become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

**White student:** I don’t think some teachers give out C4s (warnings) fairly because last year, there was a group of boys in our French class and they hadn’t even done anything and the teacher gave them C4 after C4 for no apparent reason. They felt like she was just being racist or something and each time they went into a lesson, they went out of their way to annoy her because they felt she had been unfair.

Although the students who took part in these discussions insisted that not all teachers treated black students unfairly, all the black students nevertheless stated that where students of all ethnic groups were involved in messing about or other forms of rule breaking, the black students were most likely to be picked out for reprimand or punishment. This selective form of identification was said by many of those interviewed in the various studies to be not uncommon in schools. And this was the view not only of students but of some teachers, especially black teachers, as well as being confirmed in my own classroom and playground observations.

**Sean 16 years:** If say, I’m sitting next to a white friend in class and the friend is telling me something, the teacher can hear where the talking is coming from, but instead of looking to see who is actually doing the talking, he’ll just call out my name. It’s just always me that gets the blame.
I was once observing a science lesson when just such an incident occurred. The teacher heard talking, and turning around, threw a piece of chalk at the sole black student in the class. At this, one girl said to the teacher, ‘But Miss, the talking wasn’t even coming from where Joe is sitting. You always pick on him’. There was a chorus of support from the other students. The teacher admitted afterwards that she couldn’t think why she had thought he was the one who was talking.

Sometimes singling out black students is done deliberately and oppressively.

_Tyrone 15 years:_ My friends and I were just about to go into our classes when Mr C. came and goes, ‘You, you and you’, calling out the three black boys. And he goes, ‘Give me your diaries’. So we said, ‘What for? We haven’t done anything wrong’. And he says, ‘Don’t ask me for an explanation. I don’t have to give you an explanation. I’m a teacher, and when I ask to see your diaries, you give them to me’.

_Glenda, 15 years:_ Isobel, Lorene and me are really good friends, yeah, and we always used to stick together especially at lunch times. Then this group of white girls started calling us names, racial names and calling us slags, and so we started to call them names. Anyway, it got really bad and Mr Martin, the Deputy Head decided it had to end. So he calls us three black girls and tells us that he never wants to see us together in the playground again, and so every break, Isobel has to go to that corner of the playground, (pointing) I have to go to that one, and Lorene has to go to that one. But the white girls can stay as friends and don’t have to split up. And now Isobel hardly ever comes to school and me and Lorene sometimes bunk off because there’s just no point coming to school if you can’t be with your friends.

Cullingford and Morrison (1997) emphasise the importance of friends in helping young people develop a sense of identity and for ‘re-inforcing, reflecting, and reciprocating valued aspects of the self’ (p.62). The importance of having one’s mates to muck about with and generally relieve the boredom of school routine has been discussed by other writers also (see for example Woods, 1990). That these students should have been deprived of the chance to meet with their friends was keenly felt and resented, and, furthermore, removed
one of the most important motivations for coming to school at all. But it was the unfair and racialised manner in which the deputy headteacher had solved the problem of the rival groups which rankled most in the minds of the students and was referred to in nearly all the discussions I had with students in this school.

**Respect**

This was an area of immense concern for students and also their parents, particularly for secondary school students. I mentioned earlier that adolescents may behave in particular ways which are unacceptable and that this is part of the process of growing up and establishing their independence from adults. However, in order to know what is acceptable, they need guidance from the adults with whom they come into contact and especially those who have responsibility over them. If teachers demand respect from students in the form of obedience, not ‘cheeking back’, not ‘cussing’ and so on, they need to earn this respect by always setting a good example themselves. We know from what students say that not all teachers earn such respect and that students resent their taking the line of ‘do as I say but not as I do’. Many teachers shout at, humiliate and verbally abuse students in behaviour which would gain a student acting similarly a fixed if not a permanent exclusion. Some students have been excluded for less.

I asked ten primary school children in a group interview to say what they most liked or disliked about their school. Being shouted at by teachers was what they hated most. In a survey of 200 Year 10 students, the students listed teacher attitude to them, as expressed through verbal and body language, as the greatest cause of conflict between teachers and students. But although all students were concerned about how they were treated, the notion of respect had a particular meaning for black students.

Steven, 14 years: It was the way he was talking to me. He had no respect for me. I’m not saying I wanted to be treated like an equal, after all I’m only a child, but that’s not what I’m saying. He had no human respect (original emphasis), like he wasn’t talking to another person, you understand what I mean. So I said to him, ‘How can you
expect me to act like an adult yet you don’t even talk to me or respect me like a person who has some intelligence?’

**Richard, 15 years:** I’m not rude to all teachers, but I’m rude to those who don’t show me respect. Who treat me like I’m not a person.

Steven and Richard are quite specific about teachers talking to them as if they were not human. They evidently do not see this as an aberrant form of teacher behaviour – it resonates for them with wider racial discourses which inferiorise black and other minority peoples and devalue their contribution to the world. Teun van Dijk (1993:104) notes that

Negative opinions about minority groups may be expressed and conveyed by intonation or gestures that may be inconsistent with seemingly ‘tolerant’ meanings.

Van Dijk calls these forms of behaviour ‘offensive speech acts’. To black students such speech acts signalled the ‘true intentions and feelings’ of teachers, and they were particularly sensitive to their display in public situations. Although all students resent teachers who abuse their power by treating them with disrespect, for black students this abuse of power has a powerful racial dimension which is lived out on a daily basis within and beyond the school gates. But when teachers are told that students (and not only black students) feel disrespected, they generally respond with disbelief and the riposte that ‘after all, isn’t this just what students would say?’ Few schools take the time to find out exactly what students mean when they talk about disrespect. Adolescents are particularly sensitive to being treated like naughty children even if they have done something ‘naughty’, but especially when they feel that the accusation is unjustified. Barking orders at students or using a tone of voice that implies criticism or put-down, or casting unkind looks, are some of the aspects considered by students to be disrespectful of them. As one student said, ‘Teachers don’t do that to each other, so why should they do it to us?’

Some schools, however, do take the trouble to find out what students are thinking and feeling. One commissioned a study with their Year 10 students, based on focus group discussions and a questionnaire.
The results surprised the teachers so much that they extended the study to include all Year groups and the results formed the basis of staff INSET days and future policy. Another school has an annual ‘retreat’ day with all Year 9 students and their tutors, to which they invite outside facilitators and explore different issues together, and these discussions inform the school’s academic as well as pastoral policies.

**Stereotypes**

Stereotypes of black students do not originate in schools but can be traced historically to European theories about ‘Others’ and how they could make sense of them (Rattansi and Donald, 1992). These theories have led to a variety of stereotypes which affect groups in different ways. For example, while the theory of white superiority provided a particular view of non-white peoples generally, different types of stereotypes were developed in context for different groups at particular moments in history. Black men have been variously represented as violent, aggressive, sexually out of control and engaged in illicit activities such as mugging and drug pushing, and these are perceived by black students to inform some of the stereotypes of black boys’ behaviour in school.

One sixth form student explicitly equated the assumptions some teachers were said to hold with those he believed to be held by the police. He talked of the ‘heavy-handed policing’ of black males by teachers. He was of the view that interactions between white teachers and black students were informed by stereotypes of black people in films and the media. Black teachers were different, he said, because ‘They understand the situation because they experience it themselves’. One black 15 year old summed it up like this:

**Andrew:** Teachers don’t treat students with respect anyway, but they have a different approach for black students because they think you’re a thief, they think you’re violent, they think you’re a troublemaker, and from these thoughts... just from the way we’re dressed we get stereotyped. A black boy with designer jeans and they want to know where he got them. A friend of mine was in the Withdrawal Room and the teacher was saying, making blatant racist statements saying that he
must have got his expensive clothes from drug money, and that his brother was a thief and his father was a dealer, making racist jokes like that. That's why I argue so much with teachers, because they say such things and I can't find it in myself to treat such teachers with respect.

This statement, spoken with considerable anger, indicates the deep level at which students feel abused by racist stereotypes. At an age when they need positive affirmation of their identity and a sense of their own worth, such ‘offensive speech acts’ can be nothing less than psychological abuse. Patricia Hill-Collins (1986) contends that stereotypes function to dehumanise and control. Black students felt dehumanised in a number of ways. For example, students offered numerous anecdotes of occasions when teachers assumed that when something went missing, a black student must be to blame.

**Lynda, 13 years:** We had just gone back to the classroom after PE when Miss James came and asked if she could see me. She took me into the corridor and asked if I had seen this girl's purse which had gone missing from the shower room, so I said, 'but Miss, why have you picked me out to ask?' And she said, 'I'm not picking you out, I intend to ask everybody who used the showers'. So I said, 'No, I haven't seen the purse.' She says, 'Are you sure because things could be a lot worse if you were found to be lying'. And I said, 'I haven't seen it, and I haven't taken it, OK?' and I went back into the class. Then she comes into the class and asks the whole class, she doesn't call anyone else out, she asks the whole class if anyone had seen the purse. They just think we're thieves for no reason.

There were several such examples of black students feeling that they had been unjustifiably singled out and suspected of theft or other forms of dishonesty for no other reason than that they were black.

**Cameron, 15 years:** Mr Stanley came into the class and came straight over to me and said, 'Where is it? Hand it over'. I didn't even know what he was talking about, but he just took my bag and started searching it. Only later when I was about to go home he came over to me and apologised because someone had lost their personal stereo, and he just assumed it was me (who had taken it).

Mr Stanley may well have been acting on information he received from someone. His own reasons for picking this student out may not
have been motivated by racism. But the fact that the student thought so was based on the wider experiences of black people. Historical representations of black people (and other non-white peoples who have experienced colonialism) as dishonest, affected black young people outside of as well as in school. For example, random stop and search policies by police are directed at black people five times more than any other group. This fact is seldom grasped by teachers to inform their relations with or understanding of black students. Mr Stanley should never accuse a student without first making sure of the facts, but his failure to grasp the implications for black students of his accusation is significant. For them this is a particularly sore point which connects to harassment of black people by the police. Victor’s experience, which he describes below, indicates how ‘you’re damned if you do and you’re damned if you don’t’.

Victor, 15 years: I found a cheque book. I went to hand it in to the police and went home. Next thing they were coming to my house to ask me questions and to accuse me of stealing it.

Stereotypes take various forms. Mirza (1992) describes the racialised, class and gender stereotypes held by the teachers in her study of black girls, and the sexual undertones in the white male teachers’ assumptions about them. A negative black femininity is thus produced and reproduced in the school context (Wright et.al 2000). Others (see for example Fuller 1984) write about the perceptions of teachers that black girls have ‘attitude’. I raised this point in one of my interviews with a group of black girls in the DfEE study (Blair and Bourne, 1998). What Shelley told me epitomises the ‘racial frames of reference’ (Figueroa, 1991) which inform the understandings of so many teachers:

Shelley: Teachers stereotype us, they stereotype the black students.

MB. What kind of stereotypes do they use?

Shelley: It’s just the way they stereotype us. Ms X said to me, ‘Don’t start any of your Afro-Caribbean attitude with me’. My parents are divorced, I live with my white mother, I’ve never been to the Caribbean, so what did she mean by that?
It was also felt that certain stereotypes of black students held by teachers are characterised by low academic expectations, and this too leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Nathan, 17 years: Teachers have preconceived ideas about the abilities of black students. Students pick this up and start reacting negatively. It’s usually a build up of negative feeling in the black student and then it goes to a stage where the school wants to get rid of them anyway. So if they do anything, they’re out, whereas white students don’t have that negative build up.

Black students also confirmed their experience of the common stereotyped view of them as being more able at sports than at intellectual pursuits.

**Steven, 15 years:** They’re always pushing us into sport. When it comes to school work they don’t think you can do it and they don’t give a damn about you. But when it comes to sport, they love you.

**Darren, 14 years:** I was excluded once, right, and the school was going to play a football match in the school league. Now everybody knows that I’m really good at football, and of course the teacher wanted me to play in the league, so although I was supposed to be excluded, they decided to end my exclusion so that I could play for the school.

All young people need a sense of achievement to give them direction. In his statement, Steven underlines the insecurity students feel as a result of the selective and racialised way in which they are rated in school and the correlation with how school subjects are valued and hierarchised. If students are black, they are, in Stephen’s view, prized not for their intellectual abilities but only for their lower level ‘physical prowess’ in sport. Darren illustrates how students are aware of the tendency by schools to prioritise behaviour management of black students over their academic achievement, and also of the inconsistent and selective way in which rules are applied when the interests of the school are at stake. That Darren was deemed bad enough to be kept out of school and so miss out on essential subject knowledge but good enough to be allowed back to rescue the football team, raises questions about the legitimacy of some school ex-
clclusions. Indeed one parent who was interviewed for the DfEE study considered bizarre the whole notion of sending children home as a punishment rather than suspending them from those school activities to which they had privileged access, such as certain sports.

**Racism**

In all the interviews, students were careful to differentiate between teachers whom they thought blatantly racist, those who seemed to be ignorant of what constituted racism and those for whom racism was said to operate at an unconscious level. Some students tried to define racism.

**David:** I don’t think it’s the kind of racism which says, ‘I hate black people’. It’s like, they have this feeling about black people which just won’t escape from them. It’s always there.

**Brian:** I don’t think all white teachers are racist, but it’s easy to pick out the ones that are, especially as some of them can be so blatant. There’s one teacher, even when I put my hand up first, she goes past me and asks someone else. She does that a lot. I also find that she tries to spend as little time as possible explaining things to me, then she moves on to someone else. It’s like, anything I do, however small, it seems to irritate her and she’ll make a big thing out of it. I have her for three lessons a week, and I want (original emphasis) to go to school, but I feel I can’t.

**MB.** But how can you be sure that what you are experiencing is racism and not a personality clash, say?

**Brian:** It’s the body language. If you’ve experienced it you know it and can tell the difference between one white person’s attitude and another.

**Jason:** It’s the way they speak to you, look at you, degrading you, putting you down. It’s difficult to explain. It’s more something that you feel but can’t describe. And you certainly won’t be feeling that way about all white teachers.

David’s observation illustrates the way the ‘inner eye’ operates. Brian’s experience exemplifies the processes of exclusion (as opposed to expulsion) which take place in schools. These processes
lead to student resentment and alienation, to poor and deteriorating relationships and sometimes ultimately to permanent exclusion. What was certain from my interviews with students was the enormous resentment generated when they felt they had been unfairly treated, especially if this was because of their identities as black people. One student pointed to this resentment as a major source of conflict between teachers and students.

**Jason:** Any black person that realises what’s going on, and I can tell you, no black person I know, no black person who can see that something is obviously happening to them, is going to keep quiet about it. Like in school, we can see these things happening to us, and no black person is going to be quiet when they are pushed down. They’ll always say something.

Along with a pervasive feeling that they were placed in a position of disadvantage in relation to their white peers, black students felt that their negative reactions did not match the level and extent of the unfair or unjust treatment meted out to them.

**Bryn:** Compared with the way teachers ‘cut you up’, I’d say that black students really hold back a lot, a lot... One teacher told a black girl that she looked like a chimpanzee. She just walked out and I thought, ‘Good for you. You don’t have to take that from him’, and I was cursing him in my mind. He saw the look of anger on my face so he came up and tried to talk about my work, but I just stiffened up and gave him a look which made it clear to him that I wanted him to keep away from me.

Bryn gives a vivid picture of the strong feelings black students have that their identities are being eroded and demeaned. His words encapsulate the vicarious way in which racism was experienced (Essed, 1990). In his statement, Bryn shows how an image of white teachers as racist can take hold in the minds of students. The example he gives underlines the notion that teachers and students may attribute different causes to the same events. In the situation described, the teacher did not direct his offensive remark at Bryn — it was his interaction with another black student that caused his relationship with Bryn to deteriorate. The teacher might attribute Bryn’s reaction to an internal cause (a chip on the shoulder or a
persecution complex) and not realise that Bryn’s reaction was directly triggered by the wider racial implications of the teacher’s own racist remark even though he had not targeted Bryn.

Faced with such emotionally corrosive practices in the classroom, it is not unreasonable to conclude that black students will have their ability to concentrate and participate in the classroom severely damaged. Contrast such teacher behaviour with the ‘good teachers’ of minority students. For these teachers, according to Ladson-Billings (1994): ‘Psychological safety is the hallmark of (their) classrooms. The students feel comfortable and supported’ (p.73). The link between behaviour and underachievement can be reasonably assumed in situations where students do not feel ‘comfortable and supported’.

**Gender**

In my study for my doctoral thesis, I found that black boys were four times more likely to be expelled from school than black girls (see also Wright *et al* 2000). This could be partly explained by the fact that teachers operate different stereotypes for girls and boys in co-educational contexts, but partly also by the way that boys and girls generally respond differently to situations. Teachers were perceived by the black students to be drawing on gender differentiated constructions of black people which were prevalent in the wider society. A sixth form girl observed how the internal dynamics of the school combined with external factors to affect black boys more than black girls. She was referring to her own school, which was in an inner city area where black residents experienced high levels of unemployment, poverty and police harassment.

**Gloria:** The black boys see no point, there’s nothing out there for them. Teachers don’t motivate them, they leave it up to the students themselves. I know that I’m here to stay, there’s nothing I can do about the system. It’ll be the same system for my children and grandchildren. So I think about getting the most for myself, even though I don’t like it.
Here Gloria underlines a significant point made by Mirza (1992). Girls are more likely to view their schooling as an important foundation for not only the world of work but for their future responsibilities as mothers. Black girls, according to Mirza, expect to be the primary carers of their future children and do not necessarily expect that they will have a man living with them. They are also very conscious of the fact that black men experience high levels of unemployment, and do not therefore assume that the fathers of their children will be in a position to support them. They have to think beyond the immediate relationships they have with teachers and make use of strategies which will help them survive the barriers and obstacles thrown up by racism. Boys, faced with the challenge to their masculine pride in their interactions with teachers and others in authority in the school (Mac an Ghaill, 1994), and faced with evidence that they are not likely to share in the rewards which an education gives to their white peers, are less likely to adopt passive forms of resistance in order to preserve their ‘racial’ identities.

This is not to say that girls are necessarily passive nor that all boys respond in the same way to certain situations. Gillborn (1990) for example, reported on black males who tried to keep a low profile (see also Fordham, 1996) and chose to avoid the teachers with whom they were likely to have conflict, rather than have to face the need to defend their honour and dignity by reacting to situations which they found intimidating. Mac an Ghaill (1988), amongst others, writes about the different forms of resistance that girls use which allow them the room to achieve academically. However, it seems from the evidence presented by these studies that black males are targeted more than black girls for discipline in co-educational contexts, whilst black girls are targeted more than white girls. Black girls’ experience of discipline is clearly an area for further research and analysis.

In a discussion with a group of 15 year old boys about how boys got into trouble more than girls did, one of them commented that, ‘Girls are more sensible and think about the consequences. They are more calm. Boys act hard’.
This group of boys presented a nonchalant stance, partly, one presumes, because of the need to maintain a ‘hard’ image by presenting the other side of hardness – being ‘cool’ (see Majors and Billson, 1992). But when I talked to some of them individually where they were not under pressure to protect their masculine image, they came across as vulnerable and nothing like as tough as they wanted to appear.

**Bryn:** The white boys expect us to be tough all the time. And sometimes you might just be feeling really scared inside, but you can’t show it.

Mr Friend, the headteacher at Central City Comprehensive, was particularly aware of this need to appear tough, though he seemed unaware of what he, the headteacher could do to help and support black boys.

**Mr Friend:** Black boys are cast into roles of being tough. They are not allowed to be sensitive and gentle. They are not allowed to admit to any kind of nervousness or tentativeness or to admit that they are worried about anything.

What could Mr Friend have done? It is often assumed that the only answer is to find black mentors for the students. This seems to me to be opting out rather than seeking real solutions. Black mentors can be only part of the solution. Some schools take affirmative action in relation to building relationships with the students by, for example, finding mentors from amongst the teachers, or whole departments targeting these students and helping to build their self-confidence, monitor their work, be available to help them and constantly making it clear that they have high expectations of them. For any students who have fallen behind in a subject, teachers arrange extra revision and persuade the students that they are willing to help them catch up and achieve. Some schools work with the ‘leaders’, encouraging them to attend revision and ‘bring their mates along’, and alongside all this goes plenty of praise and encouragement. This is important for a group of students who normally experience school as a place in which they have no sense of belonging. Most important, however, is caring. If students do not feel that all this is being done because
the teachers care about them, they will see it as just another control mechanism. The good practice must therefore be rooted in staff teamwork, with an agreed series of strategies and consistency of application, accompanied by high positive expectations. The aim must be to build an environment in which students feel psychologically safe and comfortable.

**Problems created by black students**

There was never, in my discussions, any attempt by black students or their parents to deny that the students broke rules or committed offences that deserved sanction. What they did refute was the notion that black students as a racial or ethnic group behaved differently from how white students would behave in similar circumstances. This perception, they felt, arose from the fact that when a black student did something wrong, it was more likely to be interpreted as symptomatic of ‘blackness’ and so of all black students than as a problem of the individual. Whereas when white students did something wrong, it was seen as a problem of that individual, not as symptomatic of ‘whiteness’. The overwhelming response from students was that black students as a group did not create any more problems for schools than did their white counterparts, but that their behaviours were interpreted as more problematic not because they were so but because teachers either did not understand them or were less tolerant of anything the black students did. In other words they were less likely to conform to teachers’ notions of the ideal student and were thus constructed as a problem by teachers (see also Wright et.al 2000). Being more likely to get into trouble or having higher levels of exclusion should thus not be interpreted as evidence that it is black students who behave worst.

Explanations for their disproportionate exclusion varied from one context to another, and according to the ethnic group of teacher, the teacher’s awareness of racial politics or the general ethos of the school. This variation indicates that racial or ethnic explanations for poor behaviour lie mainly with the perceptions of the school or the teachers in it, rather than being a problem created by students’ behaviour. This is not to deny that some teachers do face more
problems with their black students. But as the accounts in this chapter have shown, any understanding would require close and detailed scrutiny not only of what the students do but also of the context in which they are experiencing their education.

**Context**

In a shire (county) school with 3% black students, 1% South Asian students and the rest white, black students constitute 25% of all exclusions. In another inner city metropolitan school, with 3% black students, 51% South Asian students and 45% white students, black students are amongst the highest achievers and teachers could think of only one black student who had had a fixed exclusion in the previous three years. In a church school with 30% black students, the focus was on prevention and there had been no exclusions in three years. Black students in this school were said to be achieving as well and in some subjects better than their white peers. In another church school, the 30% black students were disproportionately over-represented in exclusions. Here black students were described as posing a serious disciplinary problem for teachers, and also as academically underachieving.

For schools to understand what is going on in relation to ethnicity and discipline, each has to examine its own context but also understand the wider context in which black students are over-represented in disciplinary exclusions. It is important to reflect upon whether interpretations of behaviour are based on a racial frame of reference or whether each student is perceived as an individual, and whether the personal circumstances, age and learning needs of each is taken into account. But most importantly, each school needs to reflect on its own ethos and the extent to which it subscribes to the current culture of punishment in British schools. It is also important in situations of recurring conflict to examine the history of each teacher’s relations with black students.

Students identified a number of factors which characterised teachers who picked on them or were quick to apply disciplinary warnings or punishments. These were the teachers who could not control their
classes, who felt intimidated by students, especially those who challenged their knowledge, who felt threatened by the stereotype of black students as troublemakers and, significantly, the teachers who gave boring lessons.

   **Turkish Girl:** If a lesson is boring, you can’t pay attention so you want to chuck things around and have a bit of fun.

   **Black Boy:** In a boring lesson, they are more likely to do what they want and not pay attention. They would most probably want to take advantage of the teacher.

   **White Boy:** He’s boring. Even though he teaches a subject which could be so interesting, he makes it so boring.

For their part, the teachers attributed certain problems specifically to black students or claimed that they were more prevalent among them. The teachers’ statements below are representative. One black woman teacher said:

   It really upsets me to see the way they behave. It’s almost as if they have to prove something, you know, I am the greatest, I can beat you all up, I am the coolest kid on the block.

A white woman teacher declared:

   I think they are quicker to confrontation. Their reactions to situations are often more extreme, either through the kind of language they use or their body language. I also think that African-Caribbean kids in the school are more street, more keen to have an image. I’m not saying they necessarily want to have a bad image, but image is very important, kudos, street cred is important.

A white PE teacher described the behaviour of some of the black students as ‘bizarre’:

   I’ve got a GCSE group and there are three Afro-Caribbeans in there. All extremely able. Physically able, there’s no doubt about that, but also academically able. But their behaviour is most bizarre. One of them needs to seek attention all the time, and I’ve said to him that if he behaved like that outside he’d be arrested. There’s another kid who I think wants to succeed, but because he’s mates with the other two,
he's got to be seen to be, you know, bouncing about, jack the lad, not conforming, pushing the limits.

A black male Head of Department said this:

...a lot of black boys are very macho and the way they act is very challenging. They are often defiant to authority because they have a lot of negative feelings towards school. But I also think a large number of teachers feel challenged by, or physically threatened by black pupils and they don't challenge their behaviour.

I would like to look more closely at these statements by teachers, both white and black, in order to understand the nature of the difficulties they say that black students cause. Three main surmises emerge:

• that black students’ responses to situations are more extreme and that they are quicker to be confrontational
• that black students are obsessed with image and it is not street cred to be academic
• that they are macho and some teachers find this threatening.

Variations of these statements were made by other teachers, and were largely admitted by students themselves. So we need to take them seriously in order to understand how best to respond to black students or how to change a situation which is clearly detrimental to them. These statements and others in this vein were made mainly about boys, though the statement about students’ quick reactions referred equally to the girls.

The first assumption can be interpreted in three ways. Black students are either biologically (i.e. it is a function of their race) extreme and confrontational – in which case all black students behave this way and nothing can be done about it – or black students face situations which arouse quicker and more extreme responses, or respond this way for the sake of their image.

Diversity within black communities and among black students rules out the first explanation. Not all black students respond confrontationally to every situation, as many teachers attested. Black students
themselves, and teachers, pointed to black students who were ‘passive’ in their responses (cf. Gillborn 1990). They also identified students who had particular emotional needs and who responded no differently from white students with similar needs. Indeed for a biological explanation to be valid, evidence would have to exist of unfailingly extreme responses from black students the world over!

On the second premise, research has established that black students are often placed in situations in which they are made to feel debased. In such cases, it is the institution and the people with power that are in effect ‘the problem’, not the students. As the teacher above remarked, black students have a good many negative feelings towards schools. Some writers would argue that what the students are doing is resisting the power and control being unfairly exercised over them (Sewell, 1997; Wright et al., 2000). The focus for change would have to be to remove the conditions which lead to such responses from black students.

It seems unlikely that black students in all their diversity and dispersed locations would respond in specific ways for the sake of their image. And this surmise assumes that young people of other ethnic groups care nothing about image. The same flaw exists in the surmises about black students needing street cred and being macho. In all considerations of such statements, it is important to bear in mind that these are always generalisations, because the descriptor ‘black’ is applied to people from many different countries, cultures, languages, religions and so on. And there is as much diversity between students of different Caribbean heritages as there is between students with the same Caribbean heritages.

Although teachers in my various studies did identify macho characteristics as being more prevalent among black (male) students than among whites or South Asians, it is often the case that where one or a few black students are highly visible and voluble their behaviour is seen as characteristic of all black students. In one school where the student population was predominantly Pakistani, a teacher described the behaviour of the boys in the very same terms used to describe black boys elsewhere. Furthermore, when teachers in the various
schools were asked if there were any black students who did not behave in these ways, it invariably turned out that most black students did not and that the teachers had been referring to only a particular group of friends, or to a couple of individuals who were usually identified as having problems.

This does not mean that we should not take teachers’ concerns seriously. A number of them thought, for example, that the music and dance cultures which influence black students were responsible for a peer group culture in which these characteristics are more widely displayed than in other groups. It is certain however from what the students say, that whatever specifically black peer group cultures emerge, these are, possibly in large part, a response to racialised perceptions and expectations of black students (boys) by their peers or by teachers, (see Connolly 1995), or to a sense of displacement in the society at large. Black students are expected to be cool, to be ‘tough’, to defy authority, and they will often find themselves under pressure to prove that they are all these things. Music lyrics which are homophobic and sexist simply provide them with an outlet for expressing forms of masculinity already produced through subtle and nuanced ways in the hidden curriculum and by a racialised and gendered schooling system (Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Connolly, 1995).

While carrying out a study for an LEA, I was waiting outside the office of the Head of Year when a group of Year 8 students came to line up in the corridor where I stood. I heard a white student say to a black student, ‘I dare you to let off the fire extinguisher’. The black student replied, ‘Why don’t you do it yourself, why should I get into trouble?’ Black students are generally not expected to give responses of this kind. The image, therefore, may not be what they actively seek but what some of them feel they have to uphold because this is what the world expects of them (see Wright et.al., 2000) for an excellent discussion about the interaction of race, class and gender in the experience of black students).

If black students do create more problems in some contexts, then the solution would seem to be for teachers and schools as institutions to
try to understand the pressures on young people, the racial and
ethnic dimensions of such pressure, and to find ways of overcoming
these pressures rather than punishing the students. The question
would have to be: ‘what is it about our particular context that causes
black students to be confrontational and feel they have to prove
themselves?’ What also needs to be asked is this: if the adolescent
peer group does exert more pressure on black boys than white, why
is there over-representation of black students among those excluded
even in infant and primary schools (see Hayden, 1997) and even in
areas with small numbers of black students and where the black peer
group does not appear to be an issue for teachers or students? Most
importantly, what can be done about the disproportionate application
of this sanction?

Certainly there are students who push teachers to the limits of their
patience and endurance. Some writers (see for example Rise-
borough, 1984) warn against positioning students as the ‘victims’ of
teacher behaviour. They underline the importance of viewing
students as agents in their own lives, capable of subverting teacher
intentions. Through their behaviour, such children can ‘critically
affect the teacher’s health and survival and the degree of stress that
the teacher experiences’ (Riseborough, 1984, pg. 17). Interactions in
the classroom are a two-way process. The context of teaching is un-
doubtedly important for deciding the nature and outcomes of these
relationships. A racialised environment, where racism is a factor in
the school as well as outside, is bound to compound the negative
effects of this dialectic relationship between teachers and students.
But ultimately, teachers have overall power to decide the fate of
students through the sanction available to them of exclusion.

**Conclusion**

In all these discussions, black students did not deny that they some-
times broke rules, or indeed that some black students – like students
from all groups – caused severe problems for the learning of others.
What was found to be unacceptable were the multiple assumptions
about black people which informed teacher-student interactions and
which could so easily lead to unjust decisions.
The practice of singling out black students, whether consciously or unconsciously, for differential treatment, has important implications for exclusion. If black students are singled out for extra surveillance and control, or given harsher treatment than others, they are more likely to receive a disproportionate number of disciplinary referral forms. And my various studies have all shown that they do. These referral forms are taken into account in decisions about whether a student should be temporarily excluded, permanently excluded, or given another chance, and the more referral forms a student has, the greater the likelihood of permanent exclusion. If black students in any school are seen as creating the most difficulties for teachers, it is essential to understand why this should be the case. But before any kind of analysis can take place, all racial explanations would have to be discarded. These are invalid and lead down the alley of the stereotype. Real understanding will only come with real commitment to make a difference and therefore with real listening followed by acting honestly on what is learnt. There are important questions that all those working in a school have to ask and then act upon in order to change the experiences of both the teachers and the students.