

The myth of a post-racial society: white privilege is still being perpetuated in English schools



English schools still have a problem with racism, writes [Kalwant Bhopal](#), and explains that, in spite of legislation aimed to address inequalities, schools have no legal obligation to record racist incidents. As a result, rhetoric of inclusive policy-making only serves to reinforce white privilege within the school space.

“Black boy tied to lamppost and whipped at school’s mock slave auction run by white teenagers”: this is not a headline from the last century but [from March 2018](#). Newspapers [reported](#) that a group of seven white teenagers in Bath were accused of chaining their fellow pupil to a lamppost, whipping him with sticks and calling him extreme racist names, symbolic of the slave trade. The Board of Governors refused to expel three of the pupils responsible. They were temporarily suspended and are now back at school – alongside the victim.

There is [evidence](#) to suggest that children are more likely to be bullied because of their race, religion or ethnicity, and racist incidents in schools are both under-reported and under-recorded. This may happen due to a lack of clear guidance from senior management on these issues or a lack of staff training in how to deal with racism. However, [my own research](#) shows it also happens because schools are anxious to protect their reputations and unwilling to acknowledge racism in their classrooms and playgrounds. In 2016, more than 60% of staff [reported](#) they had witnessed racist bullying in their schools, while a recent report by [OFSTED](#) indicated that racist language in schools is commonplace.

As far back as 1985, The Swann Report ‘Education for All’, highlighted the need to ensure equality of opportunity and treatment of all pupils regardless of their background. Yet we continue to live in a society in which inequalities in school predominate. In my new book, [White Privilege: the myth of a post-racial society](#) I examine how racism continues to disadvantage those from black and minority ethnic groups in schools, in higher education, and in the labour market. Despite significant advances in policy-making in these areas, racism is a key feature of the lives of black and minority ethnic groups and we are far from living in a post-racial society, with schools being a key example of this.

On the face of it, policy-making paints an encouraging picture of race and equality. The [Race Relations Amendment Act](#) (2000) made public bodies accountable for race equality. Schools had a duty to promote race equality and were expected to record and monitor racist incidents, so that incidents could be monitored. Subsequent governments have since combined this duty within the more generic legislation of the [Equality Act](#) (2010). The Equality Act introduced a Public Sector Equality Duty in 2011. The Duty applies to public bodies, including schools and academies, and extends to certain protected characteristics, of which race is one.

However, schools are not required to keep records of how they have been actively addressing their equality duties, though the Department of Education recommends it is ‘good practice’ to do so. Schools are, however, expected to publish information to demonstrate how they are complying with the Equality Duty and to prepare and publish equality objectives.

Previously, schools were required to publish *separate* equality schemes in relation to race, gender, and disability. But they are no longer required to do so, and so the attention given to racial inequalities as a single determiner of social inequality has been eroded. Schools have no legal obligation to ensure that equality based on race is addressed nor are they required to record racist bullying. As a result, in many schools, the race equality agenda has been edged into the margins rather than being at the forefront of school decision-making.

In my book, I examine what happens when parents complain about racism; often, simply by making a complaint they become villains rather than victims. Their complaints are dismissed as single acts which bear no resemblance to 'inclusive schools'; the rhetoric and *performance* of inclusive policy-making serve to reinforce white stability within the school space; while the dismissal of racist acts as a 'clash of personalities' or 'kids being kids' reinforces the refusal to acknowledge racism in schools. Consequently, the school becomes a space in which the norms of whiteness are reinforced and reproduced. No more so than when racism is challenged within its confines, the school space is used to maintain and privilege whiteness at the same time as asserting its dominance over black and minority ethnic groups. Whiteness works to [perpetuate and reinforce](#) white racial superiority.

A discussion of the failures of the education system to meet the needs of black and minority ethnic students – such as their experiences of racism, underachievements and high rates of exclusion – threatens white privilege and white stability and is replaced by a rhetoric that blames the 'other' and a refusal to accept acts of racism at face value. Until schools wake up and acknowledge the daily realities of racism within their classrooms, we will continue to read stories of pupils being tied to lampposts in mock slave auctions; and continue to see the reinforcement of white privilege.

Note: the above draws on the author's latest book, [White privilege: The myth of a post-racial society](#), published in 2018 by Policy Press.

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