

SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT: CHILDREN FROM ETHNIC MINORITIES MATCH OR OUTSTRIP WHITE CHILDREN BY THE END OF COMPULSORY EDUCATION

Just before they start school, ethnic minority children significantly underperform in early cognitive tests compared with white British-born children. But by the end of compulsory schooling at age 15/16, most ethnic minority groups catch up with (Bangladeshi, Pakistani and black non-Caribbean pupils) or even overtake (Indian and Chinese pupils) their white British counterparts (in key stage 4 tests).

These are the central findings of research by Professors **Christian Dustmann**, **Stephen Machin** and **Uta Schoenberg** from the Centre for Research and Analysis of Migration (CReAM) at University College London. The study, published in the *Economic Journal*, draws a generally positive picture of the progress of most ethnic minority pupils through the compulsory curriculum.

In particular, the researchers find that improvements in their ability with the English language is the single most important contributor to the catch-up or overtaking of ethnic minority pupils relative to white British pupils. Language accounts for up to two thirds of their relative progress.

In addition, differences in the kinds of school that ethnic minority and white children attend become smaller in secondary school. This suggests that the transitions ethnic minorities make when moving from primary to secondary school are important in explaining the changing achievement gaps.

The researchers also find that the relative progress of ethnic minority pupils is particularly pronounced in schools with more pupils from poor backgrounds. This may partly be related to teacher incentives to focus on particular pupils, possibly generated by the publication of school league tables.

The research concentrates on six main ethnic minority groups – black Caribbean, black non-Caribbean, Bangladeshi, Indian, Pakistani and Chinese – documenting the achievement gaps between these groups and white British-born individuals in England over their entire compulsory school careers (between the ages of 5 and 16). It examines three explanations for this remarkable progress: family background characteristics, school quality and teacher incentives.

The research finds that:

- At the beginning of primary school around age 6/7, all ethnic minority groups with the exception of the Chinese lag behind white British pupils at nationwide English and maths exams (key stage 1). The differences are most striking for Pakistani and Bangladeshi pupils.
- By the end of compulsory schooling around age 15/16, most ethnic minority groups catch up with (Bangladeshi, Pakistani and black non-Caribbean pupils) or even overtake (Indian and Chinese pupils) white British pupils. The exceptions are black Caribbean pupils.
- There are differences between boys and girls. Among black non-Caribbean, Bangladeshi and Pakistani pupils, relative progress is more pronounced for girls than for boys. Among black Caribbean pupils, boys lose ground while girls improve relative to their white British counterparts throughout compulsory schooling.

- English is not a mother tongue for a remarkably high fraction of ethnic minority pupils, with the exception of black Caribbean pupils. For example, among Indians, the share of native English speakers is only one in five.
- Language is the single most important contributor to the catch-up or overtaking of ethnic minority pupils relative to white British pupils, accounting for up to two thirds of the relative progress. Language also helps to explain why the relative improvement is smaller for black Caribbean pupils than for other ethnic minority pupils.
- With the exception of Indian and Chinese pupils, ethnic minority pupils are substantially more likely to be living in poverty, as measured by their eligibility for free school meals. But poverty cannot explain why ethnic minority pupils make greater progress than white British pupils.
- Ethnic minority pupils attend very different schools to their white British counterparts. For example, in primary school, the average share of white British classmates of pupils who are themselves white British is more than nine out of ten, but only one third for Pakistani pupils.
- These differences become smaller in secondary school, suggesting that transitions that ethnic minorities make when moving from primary to secondary school (and during these school phases) are of some importance in explaining the changing achievement gaps.

ENDS

Notes for editors: 'Ethnicity and Educational Achievement in Compulsory Schooling by Christian Dustmann, Stephen Machin and Uta Schoenberg is published in the August 2010 issue of the *Economic Journal*.

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