

**Identity Traps or How Black<sup>i</sup> Students Fail:**

**the interactions between biographical, sub-cultural, and learner identities**

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**Abstract**

The enduring inequities experienced by African-Caribbean students in UK schools has been well documented. This paper aims to better understand how these inequities have come to be so enduring. Through detailed analyses of data generated through a school ethnography, this paper demonstrates the processes through which African-Caribbean students are identified as undesirable, or even intolerable, learners. The paper builds on the insights offered by earlier school ethnographies while deploying and developing a new theoretical framework. This framework suggests that the discursive practices of students and teachers contribute to the performative constitution of intelligible selves and others. Drawing on this framework, the paper demonstrates how African-Caribbean race and sub-cultural identities, and further intersecting biographical identities including gender and sexuality, are deployed within organisational discourse as evidence of these students' undesirable learner identities.

**Author biography**

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## **Introduction**

This paper is concerned with understanding the continued inequities of school experiences and outcome experienced by African-Caribbean students. In developing this understanding, the paper explores the performative constitution of identity constellations inside schools, showing the complex interactions between multiple identities within shifting discursive frames. Specifically, the analysis demonstrates how the privilege associated with African-Caribbean identities within student sub-cultures is recouped and deployed within organisational discourse as ‘evidence’ of these students’ undesirable, or even intolerable, identities as learners. As such, the analysis adds to understandings of the processes of institutional racism inside schools.

The experiences of African-Caribbean students in UK schools have been the subject of research for some years. Recent reviews of research undertaken in the UK in the last two decades showed that African-Caribbean students attain persistently lower outcomes at age 16 than their White classmates; that the gaps between African-Caribbean and White students have grown; and that African-Caribbean students are significantly more likely to be excluded (suspended or expelled) from school than White students (Gillborn & Gipps 1996, Gillborn & Mirza 2000). During the period covered by these reviews, scholars have been concerned to better understand the processes involved in producing these outcomes. Such research has sought to resist prevailing ‘deficit’ notions of African-Caribbean students, their families and communities. Instead, attempts have been made to understand experiences of schooling from the perspective of African-Caribbean students and develop

new explanations for African-Caribbean students' disproportionately low educational outcomes.

Additive understandings of the subordination of particular social groups were a key feature of this research during the 1980s. For instance, Fuller's (1984) research was predicated on the understanding that African-Caribbean girls would be 'doubly subordinated' along axes of gender and ethnicity. Similarly, Mac an Ghail (1988) used an additive notion of 'triple subordination' – along axes of race, class and gender.

At the time of Fuller's (1984) and Mac an Ghail's (1988) research, as now, African-Caribbean girls tended to fair better in school than African-Caribbean boys – outcomes which are contrary to the notion of double or triple subordination. While at the time neither Fuller (1984) nor Mac an Ghail (1988) fundamentally questioned the additive model itself, both offered partial explanations for this apparent lack of fit. In trying to make sense of this apparent contradiction, Fuller (1984) made an important contribution to understandings of African-Caribbean students' school experiences. She suggested that African-Caribbean girls were simultaneously pro-education and anti-school, a position that she saw as being 'intimately connected with their positive identity as black and female' (Fuller 1984:84). Mac an Ghail (1988) developed this notion to explain why triple subordination could be 'only partially successful' (Mac an Ghail 1988:19) and show how African-Caribbean girls' 'strategies of institutional survival' (Mac an Ghail 1988:11) could be understood as 'resistance within accommodation' (Mac an Ghail 1988:9).

While African-Caribbean girls' resistances were seen to be located within an accommodation of schooling, African-Caribbean boys were seen to resist 'institutional incorporation' (Mac an Ghail 1988:110) and create 'anti-school male sub-cultures' (1988:9). These sub-cultures rejected 'Englishness' and foregrounded African-Caribbean identities, thereby offering 'collective protection and survival' (Mac an Ghail 1988:102).

While early research identified the significance of teachers' practices (Driver 1977), more recently theorisations of institutional racism have been crucial to advancing understandings of African-Caribbean students' school experiences. Mac an Ghail's (1988) study was framed by the understanding that:

'racism operates both through the existing institutional framework that discriminates against all working class youth and through 'race'-specific mechanisms, such as the system of racist stereotyping, which are also gender-specific. There may be no conscious attempt to treat black youth in a different way to white youth, but the unintended teacher effects result in differential responses, which work against black youth' (Mac an Ghail 1988:34).

Gillborn's (1990) study was underpinned by such an understanding of institutional racism.

Gillborn (1990) argued that the school context was framed by teachers' formal and informal constructions of an "ideal client" (Gillborn 1990:26 after Becker 1970), incorporating classed, gendered, and raced notions of 'appropriate pupil behaviour' (Gillborn 1990: 25). This ideal client of schooling was seen to have particular implications for African-Caribbean boys.

Gillborn (1990) argued that teachers' interpretations of and responses to the behaviours of African-Caribbean boys sustained a '*myth of an Afro-Caribbean challenge to authority*'

(Gillborn 1990:19 emphasis in original as title). This could be seen in relation to culturally specific behaviours as well as those that were common across student groups. For instance, Gillborn suggested that a particular way of walking common amongst African-Caribbean boys in the school was a cultural practice *interpreted* by the school as a challenge to authority. As such, it became a racialised site for institutional disciplinary practices and African-Caribbean boys' contestation of this. Gillborn (1990) asserted that:

‘in the day-to-day life of the school almost any display of Afro-Caribbean ethnicity was deemed inappropriate and was controlled, either officially (in the case of non-uniform dress) or informally (in the case of speech or the style of walking noted above)’ (Gillborn 1990:29).

This is not to suggest that African-Caribbean boys' contestations were unmediated.

Gillborn (1990) stressed that African-Caribbean boys' adaptations to schooling included a multitude of practices of resistance *and* accommodation which had varied and shifting meanings and functions. Nor is this to suggest *intentional* racism on the part of teachers.

Gillborn (1995) described institutional racism inside schools as ‘a dynamic and complex facet of school life ... in which routine institutional procedures and teachers' expectations may be deeply implicated.’ (Gillborn 1995:36). Nevertheless, Gillborn's understanding of racism as institutional does not render teachers inactive in its continuation. Rather, Gillborn (1995) argued that ‘teachers play an active (although usually unintentional) role in the processes that structure the educational opportunities of minority students.’ (Gillborn 1995:42).

Research by Gillborn and Youdell (2000) reiterated the importance of understandings of institutional racism in analyses of African-Caribbean students' school experiences and outcomes. This study showed how institutional discourses of ability and race coalesced to



exclude African-Caribbean students from educational opportunities rationed through practices of ‘educational triage’ (Gillborn & Youdell 2000:133).

The notion of institutional racism, then, offers important insights into how African-Caribbean students can attend schools which appear to have developed and be implementing equal opportunities policies and still be significantly *more* likely to be excluded (suspended or expelled) and *less* likely to attain benchmark educational outcomes than their counter-parts from other racial or ethnic groups.

This paper takes up the notion of institutional racism, understood to be cited and inscribed through multiple discursive frames, and deploys this alongside particular post-structural understandings of the discursive constitution of identities. The possibilities offered to understandings of race and ethnic identity by post-structural theories have begun to be developed and some significant insights have been offered (see Jacobson 1998; Mac an Ghail 1996; Miron 1999; and Zack 1997). Nevertheless, these more nuanced understandings of the constitution of race and ethnic identities have not been taken up broadly in educational research. This paper aims to make a further contribution to understandings of how the minutia of everyday life in schools constitutes African-Caribbean students as undesirable learners. The evidence presented in the remainder of this paper offers a detailed account of the ‘identity traps’ which go some way to explaining ‘how Black students fail’.

### **Theory to practices**

This analysis is underpinned by a Foucauldian understanding of discourse. This theorisation implies a subject who is constituted through the productive power of discursive practices, that is, the meanings through which the ‘world’ and the ‘self’ are made knowable and known are imputed through discourse (Foucault 1990 & 1991). The work of Judith Butler is also central to the analytical frame developed here. Drawing on the work of Foucault, Butler (1993) explores the notion of performativity which she defines as ‘that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names’ (Butler 1993:130). That is, discursive practices which appear to *describe* (pre-existing) subjects are not, in fact, simply descriptive. Rather they are *productive*.

More recently, Butler (1997a) has offered a revised understanding of performatively constituted subjects. In this work Butler departs from Austin (1962) to argue that the performative is necessarily ‘citational’ – in order to be intelligible discursive practices cite prior discursive practices – and its effects are ‘non-necessary’ – the potential for a performative to mean something else is embedded in the impossibility of fixing meaning (Butler 1997a:39 after Derrida 1988). Butler adapts Althusser’s understanding of interpellation (Althusser 1971), interpreting interpellation as a potential performative, in order to suggest that ‘[b]eing called a name’ (Butler 1997a:2) is a prerequisite for being ‘*recognizable*’ (Butler 1997a:5, original emphasis) as a subject. She also takes up Bourdieu’s notion of habitus and suggests that the dispositions of the bodily habitus might be understood as ‘tacit performative[s]’ that are formed by and *formative of* ritual and convention (Butler 1997a:159-60). Understood in this way, Bourdieu’s (1990) practical

sense of the habitus is understood as a tacit awareness of the potential performative force, and limits, of bodily practices.

Butler's understanding of performative interpellation and performative habitus have particular implications for making sense of agency. This framework suggests that the subject who has been named is able to name another – he/she has 'linguistic agency' (Butler 1997a:15). *This is not the agency of a sovereign subject who exerts her/his will. Rather, this agency is derivative, an effect of discursive power.* The linguistic agency of this performatively interpellated subject is simultaneously enabled and constrained through discourse. This subject retains intent and can seek to realise this through the deployment of discursive practices. The effects of such deployments, however, are never guaranteed due to the citationality and historicity of discursive practices.

This theoretical framework offers important tools for enhancing understandings of how African-Caribbean students are constituted in and through schooling. Those data analysed in the remainder of this paper were generated through a school ethnography which focused on Year 11 students (age 15-16) in a co-educational, multi-ethnic, outer London secondary school, 'Taylor Comprehensive', during the 1997/8 academic year. The study brought together research approaches developed within the tradition of school ethnography (see Atkinson & Delamont 1995 and Hammersley & Atkinson 1995) and more recent adaptations of qualitative methods informed by post-structural theory (see Silverman 1997).

In presenting data, sociological transcription conventions are combined with the conventions of a theatrical script to offer a series of ‘episodes’. This presentational style is adopted to underline and expose the complex, contextual, interactive and ongoing nature of discursive practices; facilitate detailed analysis of the deployment of multiple discourses, as well as their intersections and contradictions; demonstrate the analytical approach being taken; and leave the data open, as far as possible, to further, alternative analyses.

### **Constituting Black sub-cultural identities**

My analysis within this section shows how race and sub-cultural identities are constituted through students’ bodily and linguistic practices. It also begins to indicate how these sub-cultural identities are recouped and redeployed – are constituted *again differently* – within the school’s organisational discourse. As noted earlier, I will use the term ‘Black’ in my discussion of these data. This reflects the self-naming practices of the African and Caribbean students in the study whose sameness to each other, and difference from other ethnic groups, is constituted through this naming.

**-- insert Episode 1 here --**

Episode 1 illustrates how race identities are performatively constituted and contested through their naming and designation. Furthermore, it shows the discursive practices through which races are constituted as discrete, authentic and hierarchical. The group draws on a number of names that might be understood as race identities. Some of these are

familiar – Black, Indian, White. Others are perhaps more recognisable as terms of abuse – ‘Coolie’, ‘Popadom’. Drawing on Butler’s notion of performative interpellation these names are not understood as descriptive. Rather, the deployment of these names is taken as a moment in the constitution both of race identities and individual subjects within these terms. All of these names are permeated by an understanding of race as a discrete and authentic marker of identity.

Marcella strenuously and repeatedly asserts the existence of a particular way of being that is quintessentially Black and the rest of the group recognise and concur with this assertion. Despite illustrations such as Marcella’s own exaggerated mode of speech and the group’s discussion of language, behaviour and modes of bodily adornment, the girls do not pin down the exact nature of the Black way of being that they are asserting. This does not suggest, however, that the group’s assertion is spurious. Rather, it may well be the very impossibility of specifying the minutiae of the composite ‘parts’ of Blackness that give the claim its force. When Molly asserts that I share this understanding, at a certain level it is true. I do share the group’s tacit knowledge of Black, despite also being aware that an attempt to define this risks crude generalisation, essentialism, racism and, ultimately, failure. When Marcella first makes her assertion she precedes it with a disclaimer: ‘I know there’s not a certain way for a Black person to present...’. Marcella is at least implicitly aware that such assertions have been and continue to be used to denigrate Black people and legitimate their subjugation. Yet, in the context of this disclaimer, she asserts that ‘there is’ and the rest of the group concur.

It may be possible to understand the Black that the group is referring to in terms of bodily habitus (Bourdieu 1990 & 1991). By adopting Butler's suturing of Bourdieu's theory of habitus with Foucault's notion of discourse, it is possible to understand the Black asserted by the group as a constellation of discursively constituted dispositions, imbued with particular forms of discursive capital, that are deeply inscribed and exceed conscious choice or sovereign agency (Butler 1997).

In naming and asserting this specific Black race identity, the group is not simply reporting fact or offering a description. They are citing an enduring discourse of race which simultaneously inscribes and performatively interpellates race identities. A key feature of these discursive practices is a continued citation of an enduring discourse of race phenotypes or physiognomies. While there seems to be some oscillation between a discourse of essential races and a discourse of culturally constructed races, race remains self-evident and unproblematised (if problematic). At the core of the group's understanding there appears to be an implicit assertion of racial authenticity; individuals are *a* race – whether Black, Coolie, Indian or White – which is determined by the race of parents, is enduring, and can be identified. This recourse to authenticity carries with it at least a residual acceptance of race as natural and based in essences – race identity remains a biological fact.

### ***The Hierarchy within the Other***

The group does not explicitly state that hierarchical relations exist between races, yet such a hierarchy is implicit in their discussion. This hierarchy appears to be concerned not with the

relationship between Black and White race identities, but with the hierarchical relations between race and ethnic identities other than White.

Rachel's (imagined) desire to be Coolie, or even Black, infers a common, tacit understanding that these race identities are more desirable than the 'real' Indian race identity that is designated to her (which she is performatively interpellated as being). That Popadom appears to simultaneously constitute and denigrate an Indian race identity suggests that the former is of a lower status than the latter. Rachel's (alleged) 'thinking' she is Black appears to cause greater outrage than her (perceived) 'false' claim to be Coolie. This may be taken to infer that the former carries particularly high status, it may also reflect the greater plausibility of the latter claim within a discourse of race phenotypes or physiognomies. The inference that Black boys are particularly desirable as boyfriends is further indication of the high relative status of Black. The inference that Rachel's claim to a Coolie race identity enables her to establish relationships with Black boys, and the related inference that these boys would not go out with Rachel if they 'knew' her 'real' race, conveys the implicit hierarchy of Black > Coolie > Indian. Taken together, then, the discursive practices within the group constitute an underlying race Hierarchy within the Other of Black > Coolie > Indian > Popadom. This hierarchy cites and inscribes the relative status of particular race identities within broader discourses of youth/street culture – discourses which performatively constitute ethnic and race identities in particular ways.

**-- insert Episode 2 here --**

Episode 2 offers an account of legitimate inter and, in some cases, intra-race relationships. This account begins to suggest a Schema of raced hetero-sex which confirms and adds a further (hetero-)sexualised dimension to the Hierarchy within the Other. In Episode 2 Black boys are indicated as Black girls' only sexual object. While, Steve obliquely infers that he may want to go out with Black girls, he simultaneously acknowledges that this is not reciprocal and may transgress the boundaries of appropriate inter-race sexual objects and relationships. No boys of other races are identified as wanting to go out with Black girls. This appears to leave Black girls with only one legitimate raced relationship 'choice' – Black boys. In the context of the Hierarchy within the Other this might appear counter-intuitive – a correspondence between high status and high desirability might be expected. And this is the case for Black boys (see below). The exclusively intra-race nature of Black girls' appropriate relationships exposes the highly gendered nature of the Hierarchy within the Other and Black girls' position at the pinnacle of this. Black girls' position is protected and inscribed by their only going out with boys *also* at this pinnacle – Black boys. Going out with less well-placed boys might threaten Black girls' own status. Furthermore, understood as potentially reproductive relationships, these exclusively intra-race relationships can be seen as constituting Black girls as the guardians of Blackness – a constitution that cites and inscribes discourses of authentic races, racial integrity and female reproductive responsibility coupled with paternal ownership. The disavowal of Black girls' inter-race relationships, therefore, protects and inscribes Black status and the integrity of Black.



In contrast, it appears that Black boys' status is inscribed through their almost universal desirability. In Episode 2 it is stated that Black boys and White girls share reciprocal desire. The same is inferred for Black girls but is not explicitly stated. Episode 1 suggested that Black boys and Coolie girls share a reciprocal desire. As Coolie appears to act in this context as a particular specification of 'Mixed-race', it seems reasonable to extrapolate that the same will be true in relation to 'other' Mixed-race girls. Conversely, Episode 1 shows the disavowal of inter-race relationships between Black boys and Indian girls, even as 'Coolie' testifies to this reciprocal, if illegitimate, desire.

Black boys are, then, the most legitimately desired and desiring of all boys. They share reciprocal positions as legitimate sexual partners with White girls as well as girls of all races with a degree of privilege in the terms of the Hierarchy within the Other. It seems that Black boys' status is not compromised by inter-race relationships in the way seen for Black girls. Indeed, it is possible that inter-race relationships with White girls (and the expropriation of White masculine propriety this infers) *contribute* to this status. This gendering of legitimate inter-race relationships is borne out by research evidence which suggests that Black men are twice as likely to cohabit with White partners than Black women (Office for National Statistics 1996).

However, this legitimated desire and desirability is not without cost. While the status of Black boys at the pinnacle of the students' and popular cultures' race hierarchy is preserved through these discourses, the (imagined) overwhelming desire for Black boys cites and inscribes a discourses of Black hyper-masculinity steeped in the historicity of discourses of

Black savagery and sexual incontinence. This is a discourse which sustains notions of the Black man's 'threat' to White masculinities, White femininity and the 'purity' of Whiteness.

**--- Insert Figure 1 here ---**

It is noteworthy that the Hierarchy within the Other and the Schema of raced hetero-sex suggested here do not distinguish between African and Caribbean race identities. Rather, the students' discursive practices assert a singular Black identity – a constitution which may reflect the simultaneous cultural hybridity (Hall 1992) and homogenisation (Burbules & Torres 2000) that are features of globalised sub-cultures. At the same time, and in an apparent tacit inversion of discourses of White racial purity and proscribed miscegenation, mixed race identities are constituted through the Hierarchy and Schema as lesser to, and a lessening of, Blackness.

By demarcating which inter-race relationships are acceptable and which are not, the Schema of raced hetero-sex cites and inscribes notions of miscegenation and the exotic Other, themselves predicated on understandings of phenotypic or physiognomic races. The historicity of these notions is so deeply sedimented that discourses of sexuality appear as intrinsically raced: as Jacobson (1998) notes, '[t]he policing of sexual boundaries – the defence against hybridity – is precisely what keeps a racial group a racial group' (Jacobson 1998:3).

**-- insert Episode 3 here --**

***Touching***

The bodily contact and synchronised movement of Scene 1 of Episode 3 is a moment in the bodily constitution of gender, sexual, sub-cultural, race and learner identities. While the bodily chain in this Scene seems to be relatively uncommon in the school, many girls link arms as they walk around the corridors. This is a practice which is unseen among and criticised by boys. Furthermore, while there is no official rule which prohibits such consensual bodily contact, teachers regularly censure this behaviour on grounds that it is a cause of congestion and a potentially hazardous obstacle.

The bodies in the Scene cite and inscribe the bodily intimacy of girls' friendships and implicitly cite and contribute to the prohibition of such bodily intimacy between boys. Moving around in a chain of bodies is difficult and uncomfortable. That these girls move rhythmically and in time is constitutive of a femininity positioned as natural and sexually desirable, it is also potentially constitutive of their raced femininity and position in the Schema of raced hetero-sex. The chain displays the inaccessible Black-heterosexual-feminine body to a (multiply raced-) heterosexual-masculine audience. This chain of bodies *does* create an obstacle which other students must navigate. In this way it is indicative and formative of the group's location at the pinnacle of the Hierarchy within the Other, a location which is itself constituted as incommensurable with official school norms. That such a bodily chain is likely to be censured if seen by a teacher cites and inscribes the girls' irreverence for school norms. Whether the girls share intent, and whether this intent is

concerned with mounting a bodily challenge to school norms and/or inscribing the unity of the group and its sub-cultural status, these girls' bodies are acting their place in discourse.

### ***Slouching***

The postures of the boys in Scene 2 of Episode 3 are counter to the school's known expectations for deportment inside the classroom. The ideal student, even the tolerable student, does not slouch, rest his head as if asleep, or rock on the back legs of his chair. In terms of the official school discourse these postures cite and constitute the boys' negative school orientation. The school also constitutes these students' identities in terms of their educational 'ability' – this class is at the bottom of a hierarchy of eight stratified teaching sets. A disproportionate number of the boys in this group are Black and Mixed-race. I have discussed elsewhere the impact of such set allocations as an element of educational triage which appear to be particularly damaging for Black boys (see Gillborn & Youdell 2000). In terms of the student sub-culture, the boys' bodies cite heterosexual-masculinity, the privilege of Blackness, irreverence for the school and high sub-cultural status, all of which are intimately linked. In seeming contradiction to these bodily practices, these boys not only continue to attend this lesson, they participate – they ask and answer questions and express concern over forthcoming external examinations. It appears that the boys' bodily practices provisionally offset the diminished status – or even humiliation – associated with their location in the lowest teaching group. The sub-cultural cool of these masculine bodies counteracts the (marginally) pro-school identities inferred through continued attendance at and participation in this lesson. There appears to be a tacit agreement amongst these boys – if the masculinity of sub-cultural privilege and irreverence to school norms is maintained

bodily, then the concomitant negative school orientation can be temporarily suspended and continued attendance at and participation in the lesson can be legitimised. In saying that this is a tacit agreement I am suggesting that it is a necessarily collective practice but one which is unlikely to have been discussed or verbally agreed on. Rather, the boys have a practical sense of the value of their bodily dispositions in this context and deploy these as second nature in ways which sustain both their masculine identities *and* their legitimate participation in education.

The boys' postures go unacknowledged and unchallenged by the teacher. It seems that the teacher understands (at least tacitly) the contradiction between the boys' sub-cultural and learner identities. That is, she is aware that these boys might well have opted not to 'risk' their sub-cultural identities and stopped attending this lesson. She may also anticipate (again, at least tacitly) that the masculine bodies which the school censures may be acceptable, or even valued, in the likely (assumed) post-school destinations of these boys. The teacher appears willing, then, to forego the school's usual expectations of deportment. In another teaching context (perhaps a higher teaching set) such bodily practices would be designated so anti-school that they would constitute the students as undesirable. Indeed, such designations may have contributed to these boys' trajectories into the lowest teaching group.

The Schema of raced hetero-sex and the Hierarchy within the Other demonstrate some of the discursive processes through which Black students are privileged in the student sub-culture. Yet as Episode 3 begins to show, beyond the reach and influence of the discourses

of youth/street culture, this privilege may have limited value. In terms of Bourdieu's (1990) capital, in the context of the student culture, these students have capital of high market value. In the context of the school's institutional culture, and hegemonic culture more broadly, the value of such capital shifts.

For Bourdieu, the market value of a given form of capital is not intrinsic but varies across contexts or market locations (Bourdieu 1990 & 1991). By conceiving of forms of capital as discursive, both their values *and* meanings are seen to be mobile and formative. The markets in which discursive capital circulates are also discursively constituted – the meanings, limits and legitimacy of these markets are constituted through discourse. As such, forms of discursive capital can be understood to circulate within discursive markets. Adopting this understanding, it appears likely that students' youth/street culture privilege will be inversely related to their privilege in the discursive markets of the school. Indeed, for Black boys, the dispositions and capitals that secure them the pinnacle of the Hierarchy within the Other and Schema of raced hetero-sex, may not only be devalued but, extending Bourdieu's economic analogy, may be the very practices which constitute their negative equity in discursive markets dominated by hegemonic culture. It is to these issues that the remainder of this paper will turn.

### **Identity Traps – constituting Black learners**

These performatively constituted Black identities are not without risk and cost. If we accept Althusser's understanding of subjection (Althusser 1971), the position of subject always entails cost – subjection is simultaneously formative and regulative. In this sense the

subject who is constituted as a subject by turning to the hail is necessarily ‘self-incarcerating’ (Butler 1997b:32). The notion of the self-incarcerating subject is useful for understanding how *the sub-cultural privilege of students’ Black identities may become a discursive trap*.

The analysis offered here suggests that identity constellations frequently bring with them particular limits as well as further constitutions which are unforeseen, undesirable or even counter to those identities which the subject intentionally or tacitly seeks. That is, it may be the very practices which constitute privilege in the Hierarchy and Schema which organisational discourse recoups and redeploys in ways which constrain the sorts of learners that Black students can be.

***Black sub-cultural identities: (mythical) challenge or discursive entrapment?***

Students’ sub-cultural constitutions of Blackness and organisational constitutions of Blackness are deeply entwined. The moment of practice in which the Black student constitutes him/herself within the terms of the student sub-culture may also be the moment of practice in which the school organisation constitutes him/her as a challenge to authority.

Drawing on the theoretical tools outlined above, the analysis that follows shows how the apparently mundane bodily practice of leaving a room contributes to the constitution of Black students as intrinsically at odds with and a challenge to school authority.

Furthermore, I suggest that it is the very success of these students’ Black youth/street-cultural identities which entraps them within institutional and broader discourses of the Black challenge to White hegemony.

***The school's discursive relationship with and constitution of Blackness***

Blackness is censured within and through the discursive practices of the school organisation. This is not an explicit censure, nor is it a censure of some innate or intrinsic Blackness. Rather it is an implicit censure of particular youth/street sub-cultural constitutions of Black identity. That is, at the level of the institution, discursive practices of Black youth/street culture are tacitly mediated through discourses which constitute these practices as inherently challenging to the school's (or individual teacher's) authority and, by extension, the broader White hegemony. This is not simply a rejection of the sub-cultural meanings of discursive practices of Blackness. It is a mediation which in rejecting these sub-cultural meanings constitutes particular (and denigrated) Black learner identities.

The school's constituting interpretations of Black sub-cultural identities as intrinsically anti-school and a challenge to authority are tacit. It is unlikely that any racialised or racist *intent* underpins these constitutions. Rather, the racialised and racist nature of these constitutions can be understood in terms of common-sense and institutional racism. Such racism operates through the historicity – the sedimented meanings – of unrecognised and unacknowledged organisational and common-sense discourses which cite and inscribe the biological and/or cultural deficiency, hyper-sexuality, deviance, and threat of Blackness – the discourse of a Black challenge to White hegemony.

At the level of the body, discourses of phenotypic or physiognomic races, which insist on bodily race that is observable and classifiable, contribute to the ongoing constitution of



Black identities (Alcoff 2001). As an assemblage of students is subjected to the surveillant gaze of the teacher, the endurance and authority of these discourses ensures that the teacher sees these Black students: students who, through an array of further raced discourses are classified as ‘trouble’, a challenge to authority, to be kept under closer surveillance in order to be subjected to greater control.

Black students’ practices, then, are mediated through organisational and common-sense discourses which designate these sub-cultural and race identities as inherently counter to the school organisation and culture. Black students’ discursive constitutions of race and sub-cultural identity are at once *censured* by the school organisation as undesirable and simultaneously *deployed* as ‘proof’ of this undesirability. In this way, it is the very cultural capital within the student milieu of Black sub-cultural identities which renders these identities undesirable at the level of the institution. Furthermore, in the moment of institutional censure and deployment, the school organisation also contributes to the ongoing constitution of these sub-cultural identities *and* the incommensurability of these with desirable learner identities.

**-- insert Episode 4 here --**

The school’s constituting mediations of Black learner identities can be seen in Episode 4. The Head of Year stands looking out over an assembly of students seated on the hall floor. His position optimises the capacity of his surveillant gaze; this is a moment in the deployment of technologies of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1991). These Black boys may

or may not be being more disruptive/less attentive than other students, but any disturbance is minimal – it is not apparent to me. Out of a largely White student population it is a group of Black boys who are subjected to particular and continued surveillance and, ultimately, ejected from the hall. This is not because the Head of Year is deliberately discriminating against Black boys. It is because those sedimented discourses through which the Head of Year classifies the student population ensure that these boys are identified as being a challenge to authority and, therefore, in need of greater surveillance and control.

This analysis might seem to suggest that if Black students were able or prepared to jettison practices of Black sub-cultural identities then they would not be subjected to the surveillance and control of this tacit racism. Yet to suggest that it might be Black students who should modify themselves in order to be constituted as desirable learners seems vulnerable to being recouped by discourses of cultural difference and *deficit* which the school's constituting practices cite and inscribe. Bulter (1997a) suggests that the promise offered by the performative is the possibility for identities to mean something else or to endure in contexts where they have not belonged – a possibility which she calls a politics of performative resignification. My preceding discussion suggests that these constitutions of Blackness cannot be reinscribed – made to mean differently – through any simple act of personal presentation.

The practices of Black students are by no means uniform, yet students who do not fit enduring constitutions of Blackness are frequently overlooked or constituted as exceptional (for instance, especially talented; middle class not working class; African not Caribbean).

See, for example, Connolly 1995, Gillborn 1990 & 1995, Mac an Ghail 1988, and Sewell 1997. Enduring discourses of visible, classifiable race and the Black challenge to White hegemony bound the intelligible subject positions available to Black students. These discourses are inscribed once again by constituting explanations for difference which foreground 'gifts' and 'talents' or biographical specificities. This analysis does not infer that Black young people cannot reinscribe their identities, but it does begin to map the limits of a politics of performative resignification.

***Black Students' constitutions of self and relationships with the school***

In a racialised school context, students know, at least tacitly, that their Blackness renders them undesirable learners. These Black students cannot have both a pro-school, positively oriented learner identity *and* a high status Black sub-cultural identity. This is not simply because these Black students refuse such dual identities. Rather it is because these identities are constituted, in part, through their incommensurability and opposition. In this context, the Black identities at stake are self-consciously racialised *and* politicised. Irrespective of the fact that these identities trap students in discourses of authentic races and the incommensurability of Blackness and desirable learners, these identities are (at least partially and tacitly) a response to and resistance of White hegemony.

It also seems likely that Black students' sub-cultural identities play a significant role in the maintenance of their self-esteem or even their sense of self. These Black students cannot be 'pro' the very institution which they understand themselves to be subjugated by, and experience themselves to be discriminated against within, without substantial cost. While

this does not mean they must be *anti*-school, the historicity embedded in the discourses through which these identities are constituted forecloses the viability of the simultaneity of Black sub-cultural status *and* pro-school. The ‘Uncle Tom’ which might be one alternative identity available to these students does not promise a markedly better relationship with the school and seems to insist on a markedly worse relationship with the self and peers. It is perhaps useful to understand this in terms of Althusser’s subjection through the turn to the Law (Butler 1997b citing Althusser 1971). If the school organisation is positioned as the Law which hails these students, then the students turn through their desire for subjectivity (albeit also subjection) and tacit ‘guilt’ over their contestation of the subjugating authority of the Law. That students turn at this hail is further explained by the fact that the subjectivity which proves (constitutes) their guilt in the school context is also the subjectivity which constitutes their value in other (sub-cultural) contexts.

This analysis suggests that the school organisation and Black students are engaged in a complex series of performative constitutions of identities which present something of a double bind to Black students. Namely, if these students want the protection (Mac an Ghail 1988) afforded by the status of a Black sub-cultural identity (and it is unsurprising that they do as the alternatives available appear extremely limited), then the cost of this is the concomitant constitution of an inherently challenging learner identity that must *be at once censured and deployed* by the school organisation.

This is illustrated by my analysis of the practices of the boys as they leave the hall in Episode 4. The way that the boys walk seems much like the Black boys’ walk discussed by

Gillborn (1990). The boys in Episode 4 are not disciplined *for* walking in this way (as in Gillborn 1990), rather, they walk in this way *after having been disciplined*. I suggest that the meaning(s) of this walk, and the non-verbal utterance of the final boy, are constituted by and constitutive of both Black sub-cultural and learner identities. These bodily practices are not intrinsic markers of either Blackness or a Black challenge to school authority. It is the congealed institutional meanings designated, but not once and for all fixed, to these bodily practices which constitutes these practices as a challenge to school authority. These meanings are not inaugurated within the Episode, they are citational. They are imbued with an embedded historicity which the Head of Year and these Black boys as well as other staff and students are well aware of (at least tacitly). The performative force leant to these bodily practices by this historicity as well as the institutional authority of the school constrains tightly the possibilities of alternative meanings within this context.

This is not to suggest that, at the level of the boys' intent, they are simply leaving the room with some neutral gait which at once cites and forms their bodily habitus. While the boys' gait may well be understood as a disposition of bodily habitus, in this context it is unlikely that it exceeds the boys' conscious choice. It is important to consider the boys' status within the student sub-culture as well as their audience in understanding the implications of the way they leave the room. These boys are positioned at the pinnacle of both the Hierarchy within the Other and the Schema of raced hetero-sex. These sub-cultural identities are publicly threatened by their ejection from the hall – high status masculinity is denied as these boys are provisionally constituted as student-child and forced to submit to the authority of the teacher-adult. The boys' walk, and the final boy's non-verbal utterance

(constituted here as irreverently ‘kissed teeth’, but equally plausibly an expression of frustration at being ejected from the hall (again)?), might be understood as attempts to recoup this provisional constitution. The boys’ bodily practices cite and inscribe their sub-cultural identities, reasserting and confirming their status despite its denial by the school. As such, it is a further moment in the ongoing constitution of these identities. Yet as I have already shown, within the school’s institutional discourse these bodily citations and inscriptions of sub-cultural identity and status, and their potential to recoup the ‘student-child’ which being ejected from the hall entails, simultaneously cite and inscribe a Black challenge to White hegemony.

These boys are trapped in a double bind which is the effect of two realms of constituting discourses, that of the student and street/youth culture and that of the school organisation. I suggest that the boys know that such an exit from the hall will be understood by the Head of Year, other staff and students as a challenge to the authority of the Head of Year and the school more generally. To walk out of the room in this manner, within the discursive frame which permeates and constrains this context, is a clearly recognised assertion of a Black sub-cultural identity which is constituted as oppositional to the school. That is, it is constitutive of an intolerable learner identity. Yet by walking out of the room in this way, and uttering a (particular) non-verbal exclamation on exit in the case of the final boy, the boys are able to acquiesce to the Head of Year’s discipline while simultaneously reasserting a high status sub-cultural identity which is inscribed by the school even as it is constituted as intrinsically at odds with the school institution. It seems likely that these boys are well aware of this double bind and actively choose to prioritise a Black sub-cultural identity. To

do otherwise in this discursive frame would be to (hopelessly) attempt to constitute themselves as desirable learners. Such an attempted constitution would be hopeless because this is a learner identity from which these boys are barred through the school's organisational discourses *as well as* their own discursive practices through which they challenge this constituting bar.

### **Conclusion**

This paper shows how it is through the most apparently trivial moments of everyday life in school that African-Caribbean students' identities as learners come to be constituted as undesirable, intolerable, far from 'ideal', within the terms of the hegemonic discourses of the school organisation.

The body, and its apparently mundane movements, constitute students in particular ways – in the case of African-Caribbean students it seems that the school organisation deploys these bodies to the severe detriment of the students themselves. This indicates the importance of understanding the ways in which the body is involved in the constitution of identities. My analysis suggests that these potentially performative bodily activities are an integral part of the discursive constitution of identities. They do not supplement the discursive – accessible and meaningful only through discourse, they are already discursive. This underlines the importance of making a particular distinction between the linguistic and the discursive. The linguistic and the discursive are not one and the same. The discursive field is constituted by and constitutive of representations whether these are linguistic, textual, visual, bodily or otherwise. Bodily practices are not somehow inherently

White/Black, masculine/feminine, pro-/anti- school, imbued with particular degrees of sub-cultural status. Rather, bodies are designated within these terms through discourse – their meanings are cited and inscribed. Just as the historicity of discourse is sedimented through its citation within linguistic practices, so it is sedimented through its citation within bodily practices be these intentional, tacit or unintentional.

Identities are constrained within mobile discursive chains which can act to trap particular identities in ways which are counter to or at odds with the intent or desire of the individual subject. Constellations of identities are connected in and constituted through discursive chains which render some identities accessible and some identities inaccessible or even unintelligible. Of particular significance are the ways in which discursively embedded relationships between biographical or sub-cultural identities and learner identities trap students within particular learner identities which seem almost impossible to escape. Specifically, African-Caribbean sub-cultural identities are deployed within organisational discourse as evidence of (to constitute) undesirable learners.

These connections are not new. The analytic tools offered here, however, significantly enhance understandings of the relationships between learner, biographical and sub-cultural identities. This offers further insight into the processes through which institutional racism impacts on the educational experiences and outcomes of African-Caribbean students.



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<sup>i</sup> The term ‘Black’ is used here to refer to African-Caribbean students. In my introductory and concluding discussions I use the widely accepted term African-Caribbean. My discussion of those data presented uses the term Black – the term that students who might also be identified as African and Caribbean, and whose experiences and accounts are drawn on in this paper, used to refer to themselves.