

Article

Do School Exclusions and Attainment Outcomes Disproportionately Impact Minority Ethnic Pupils? Analysis of Pupil Characteristics, Segregation, and Outcomes in England

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Abstract: Large-scale administrative datasets show disproportionate figures for attainment outcomes and school exclusions for pupils in some ethnic groups in England. This surface gap in attainment and school exclusion is concerning, and we consider whether ethnicity is really the driver here. In this paper, we present the findings on KS2 and KS4 attainment and exclusion outcomes for the cohorts in 2019, which are available from the National Pupil Database in England (with around 600,000 pupils per cohort). We present the outcomes and other characteristics for each ethnic category available. The analyses then modelled the attainment and exclusion outcomes via multivariate regression, in terms of individual pupil characteristics and school-level figures including school segregation by pupil ethnicity and disability. The predictors were entered in batches from pupil background, through prior attainment, and school-level measures, to individual ethnicity. The findings show that prior attainment and special needs/disability status are the main drivers of attainment at both KS2 and KS4. Individual pupil ethnicity did not help to explain either attainment or exclusions, over and above these other factors, and this finding largely corroborates the descriptive results. However, the factors related to school-level segregation by ethnicity, free school meal eligibility (FSM), and having English as an additional language (EAL) are somewhat relevant in predicting pupils' permanent school exclusion at KS4. These findings have implications for admission policies that can reduce school segregation and interventions that can support disadvantaged pupils' wider learning experiences.

Keywords: school exclusions; ethnic attainment gap; ethnic segregation between schools



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1. Introduction

Schools are expected to help equalise opportunities and maximise fair outcomes for all pupils. There is concern in England, and elsewhere, about the disproportionality between the ethnicity of the teacher workforce and of the students in schools (Gorard et al., 2023). This paper looks specifically at the ethnic mix of students in schools in England, and the extent to which the ethnicity of students and the pupil ethnic mix in schools is linked to attainment and school exclusions, once other background factors are accounted for. The work is part of a larger project that includes three large systematic reviews of evidence on ethnic disparities in schooling, a national survey of teachers, and an analysis of School Workforce Census data over 12 years. Overall, these sources will provide an authoritative picture of existing evidence and population data on historical trends and geographical patterns. This paper is a key stepping-stone to the next phase, which is to link the results

described here to the School Workforce Census to assess whether the ethnicity of teachers in each school is linked to the outcomes of students of the same ethnic category. We have previously conducted such an analysis using aggregated data (Gorard, 2023a) but want to conduct a more detailed one with individual student data.

In this paper, we summarise the methods used and present figures from the National Pupil Database 2019 that show indicators of possible disadvantages, attainment scores, and exclusions aggregated for each of the 16 ethnic groups. We then describe four regression models used to help explain patterns of attainment and exclusion at Key Stages 2 and 4 (for students aged 11 and 16). The paper ends with a discussion of the limitations, meaning the implications of the results.

2. Ethnicity and Attainment

In England, the majority of the population is described as “White” in terms of their ethnic origin, but there are some sizeable minority ethnic groups, including White from outside the UK, some of which tend to be disadvantaged educationally. There are relatively stable differences in the average attainment outcomes for different ethnic groups—stable both in terms of annual snapshots and over individuals’ school careers (Gorard, 2018). Chinese and Indian-origin pupils generally have the highest average attainment at ages 8 (Key Stage 1 or KS1), 11 (KS2), and 16 (KS4). The majority of White British pupils have scores close to, but just above, average until KS4. Other Asian, mixed, and other groups have scores below average until KS4. The only group with consistently lower average scores at school is pupils identified as Black—although the highest level of attainment by Black pupils can be higher than that of Chinese pupils (Gorard et al., 2017). These relative attainment figures are, of course, only averages, and there are high attainers in every sub-group of pupils (Lessof et al., 2018). Black African pupils tend to have higher average attainment than those of Black Caribbean origin. These results can then affect continuation in later formal education after the age of 16 (Gov.UK, 2023).

To a large extent, these differences in attainment reflect and can be explained by differences in poverty and to some extent special educational needs (SENs) (Gorard, 2018). Chinese pupils are far less likely to be registered as coming from families living in poverty (eligible for free school meals or FSMs), while Black pupils are far more likely to. What appears as an ethnic difference is most likely an economic one (DfE, 2017). Similar issues arise in other countries, including the US. This idea is considered further in this paper in relation to attainment and school exclusions.

Another possible explanation for the surface attainment gap by ethnicity is a mismatch between the ethnicity of pupils and their teachers (Redding, 2019). This idea is the basis for this initial consideration of patterns of attainment by ethnicity (see above).

3. Ethnicity and School Exclusions

As an integral part of educational policy and practice, discussions surrounding school exclusion intersect with broader debates about inclusive education, social justice, and the role of schools in supporting all students. In England, exclusions can be temporary, also known as suspensions, where a child is not permitted to attend schools or attends in isolation for a fixed period, usually following bad behaviour. Exclusions can also be permanent, also known as expulsion from school, usually following repeated bad behaviour. The process of exclusion raises legal and ethical considerations regarding the consistency of decision-making across schools and regions. Media and social media coverage of extreme or controversial exclusion cases has further fuelled public interest and stimulated dialogue about the underlying issues and potential solutions (Osler & Hill, 1999). School exclusion

serves as a focal point for examining the complexities of discipline, equity, and student well-being within educational systems.

According to the Department of Education (DfE) regulations for schools in England, the following 16 reasons are the legal basis for school exclusions ([Department for Education, 2023a](#)):

1. Abuse against sexual orientation and gender identity
2. Abuse relating to disability
3. Bullying
4. Damage
5. Drug- and alcohol-related
6. Inappropriate use of social media or online technology
7. Persistent disruptive behaviour
8. Physical assault against a pupil
9. Physical assault against an adult
10. Racist abuse
11. Sexual misconduct
12. Theft
13. Use or threat of use of an offensive weapon or prohibited item
14. Verbal abuse or threatening behaviour against a pupil
15. Verbal abuse or threatening behaviour against an adult
16. Wilful and repeated transgression of protective measures in place to protect public health.

There is no simple reason to believe that any of the above-mentioned reasons for school exclusion should lead to disproportionate patterns in terms of pupils' gender, socioeconomic status, age, ethnicity, or disability. However, disproportionate exclusion patterns emerge for pupils persistently identified as having socioeconomic disadvantage, disability, or coming from some minority ethnic groups ([Cole et al., 2019](#); [Demie, 2022a](#)). Key Stage attainment results also show low attainment outcomes for pupils who had previously been excluded from school ([Gorard, 2023b](#); [Strand, 2024](#)).

School exclusion has become a prominent topic of discussion due to its apparent impact on pupils' futures, particularly for those from marginalised or disadvantaged backgrounds. The consequences of exclusion, whether temporary or permanent, could be far-reaching, affecting pupils' educational progress, social integration, and emotional well-being. Concerns arise over the disproportionate representation of certain groups, such as those with special educational needs or from minority ethnic backgrounds, in exclusion statistics, prompting questions about fairness and equity in disciplinary practices. The Department of Education statistical release of 2023 showed a slight increase in permanent exclusion rates in England ([Department for Education, 2023b](#)). However, the highest permanent school exclusion rates had been seen in 2016/2017, increasing by up to 300% in a year ([McCluskey et al., 2019](#)). Pupils identified as having Special Educational Needs or Disabilities (SEND) ([Strand & Lindsay, 2009](#)), from specific minor ethnicities ([Alan et al., 2023](#)), who speak English as an Additional Language (EAL) ([Clegg et al., 2009](#)), are eligible for free school meals (FSMs) ([Black, 2022](#)), and boys ([Ripley & Yuill, 2005](#)) persistently receive more school exclusions. This evidence indicates that pupil characteristics beyond their control can be the underlying determinants of educational opportunities and outcomes.

Prior evidence has shown that pupil segregation by poverty, ethnicity, and disability has a detrimental impact on pupils' academic achievement and life-long outcomes ([Gorard, 2016](#); [Gorard et al., 2017](#); [Gorard, 2023a](#)). Schools in economically disadvantaged areas often have fewer resources, less experienced teachers, and a lack of access to extracurricular activities or advanced coursework. As a result, pupils from low-income families may face

barriers to academic success compared to their wealthier peers and experience school as an inaccessible place for their social-emotional development and academic progress (Freeman & Steidl, 2016). School exclusion policies and practices can inadvertently target pupils in segregated school settings, as pupils of colour and those from low-income backgrounds are more likely to face harsh disciplinary actions compared to their White or more affluent peers for similar infractions (Kupchik & Henry, 2023). Exclusionary practices, such as zero-tolerance policies, can exacerbate disparities in punishment (Stewart-Hall et al., 2023), and this can then have consequences for how pupils are treated or allocated resources, and how likely they are to make progress at school. Evidence also indicates that exclusion policies are actively enforced in schools with higher segregation levels and the implementation disproportionately targets pupils of Black African heritage and those with recorded disability (Bell & Craig, 2023). Segregation here refers to the extent to which students with similar backgrounds are educated in schools together, especially when they are from disadvantaged, or potentially disadvantaged, backgrounds. Poor children tend to do worse in schools with high concentrations of other poor children. And the same applies to some extent to concentration by any background characteristic such as SEN, EAL, or ethnicity.

There is extensive correlational evidence based on large-scale administrative datasets showing disparities in the academic outcomes of pupils based on factors such as background characteristics, family socioeconomic status, prior attainment, school attendance, school demographics, and school average attainment. In this paper, we present the findings for attainment and exclusion outcomes accounting for all known factors available from the National Pupil Database in England, including the role of school segregation by pupil ethnicity and disability.

4. Methods

The data in this paper comes from the National Pupil Database (NPD), covering all state-funded pupils at schools in England in 2019. The NPD is an official record supplied by schools to the government of each pupil's details, background, courses, and qualifications. The year 2019 was chosen as the most recent at the time of writing that had attainment data unaffected by the COVID-19 lockdown. The focus is on the two exam cohorts for Key Stage 2 (KS2, aged around 10/11) and KS4 (aged around 15/16). There were 649,245 pupils in the dataset at KS2 and 609,682 at KS4.

This paper uses 16 sub-categories of student ethnic origin, including a category where ethnicity is not known or refused. The category White includes White British, Irish, Welsh, and Scottish (White British). The analysis also considers pupils being eligible for free school meals (FSMs, an indicator of poverty), having an identified Special Educational Need or Disability (SEN), or an Education and Health Care plan (EHC), and speaking English as an Additional Language (EAL). Outcomes include attainment scores in standardised national examinations at KS1 (age 7), KS2 (age 11), and KS4 (age 16) and numerical records for exclusions from school (the number of fixed exclusions from school). NPD records for KS4 attainment include both raw scores and official progress or value-added scores (Progress 8 from KS2 to KS4). Progress scores from KS1 to KS2 are computed as simple value-added models (with R for the reading model of 0.735, writing 0.736, and maths 0.752).

The extent to which pupils with certain characteristics are clustered within schools, or rather segregated between schools, is calculated for each pupil in terms of their segregation residual (Gorard et al., 2022). This is computed at the school level as being the number of pupils with a characteristic (such as being FSM-eligible) in that school, divided by the number of pupils in England with that characteristic, minus the number of all pupils in that school, divided by the number of all pupils in England.

$$\text{Gorard Segregation Residual} = \frac{\text{Disadvantaged pupils per school}}{\text{Disadvantaged pupils in England}} - \frac{\text{All pupils per school}}{\text{All pupils in England}}$$

A negative segregation residual therefore means that the average clustering of that characteristic in any school or for any pupils is less than would be expected if that characteristic were spread evenly across the system.

All of the variables used are first displayed as frequencies for each ethnic group. Then, the paper describes linear regression models for each of KS2 and KS4 attainment and exclusion outcomes, using the other pupil characteristics, school segregation residuals by ethnicity and disability, and prior attainment as possible predictors.

There are four regression models, using as outcomes the real numbers for attainment point scores, and for the number of fixed exclusions, for both KS2 and KS4 cohorts. The predictors are entered in stages—starting with pupil backgrounds such as age and sex, then adding prior attainment, then school-level measures such as the segregation residuals for FSM or SEN, and ending with pupil individual ethnicity flags. There were 15 ethnicity flags, such as Pakistani or not (see Table 1). The variables are used in this way to see whether surface differences between some ethnic groups can be explained by other variables such as those representing poverty. Within each stage, variables are entered in a forward manner, so that the most useful predictors are retained, and those variables not adding to the prediction are discarded.

Table 1. Frequency of each ethnic group at KS2 in NPD 2019.

Ethnicity	Frequency	Percentage
Any other ethnicity	12,710	2.0
Asian, any other	12,156	1.9
Bangladeshi	11,074	1.7
Black—African	26,219	4.0
Black—Caribbean	7162	1.1
Black, any other	5252	0.8
Chinese	2844	0.4
Indian	19,328	3.0
Mixed, any other	13,920	2.1
Null, not obtained, or refused	10,268	1.6
Pakistani	29,022	4.5
Traveller/Gypsy/Roma	2810	0.4
White British	428,428	66.0
White and Asian	8864	1.4
White and Black	15,638	2.4
White, any other	43,550	6.7
Total	649,245	100.0

5. Findings

5.1. Descriptive Results

In both the KS2 and KS4 cohorts in 2019, White other, Pakistani, and Black African were the most populous ethnic groups after White British, ignoring those whose ethnicity is not known (Tables 1 and 2). The smallest groups are Travellers and Chinese. At KS2, only 2% of pupils have an ethnic group that is not known, but this rises to 11% at KS4.

There are variations in the background characteristics of pupils by ethnic origin. Tables 3 and 4 show some of the background characteristics of pupils in England for the KS2 and KS4 cohorts, by ethnicity. Black Caribbean, mixed White and Black, and Traveller pupils are the most likely to be FSM-eligible (poor) in both primary and secondary schools. Chinese, Indian, and White other pupils are much less likely to be FSM-eligible. And the

same pattern generally appears for the frequency of pupils having an identified Special Educational Need and Disability (SEND) and Education Health Care plan (EHC). Black African, Black Caribbean, and Black other pupils live in the most deprived neighbourhoods (based on the income deprivation affecting children index, IDACI). On average, White British pupils live in somewhat less deprived areas. Factors such as these can help explain differences in average attainment or exclusions between these ethnic groups (as illustrated below). It might be expected, given the well-established link between poverty and attainment, that Black Caribbean and some other ethnic groups would have lower average attainment, for example.

Table 2. Frequency of each ethnic group at KS4 in NPD 2019.

Ethnicity	Frequency	Percentage
Any other ethnicity	9713	1.6
Asian, any other	9359	1.5
Bangladeshi	9949	1.6
Black—African	19,946	3.3
Black—Caribbean	7714	1.3
Black, any other	3978	0.7
Chinese	2010	0.3
Indian	15,463	2.5
Mixed, any other	10,310	1.7
Null, not obtained, or refused	67,963	11.2
Pakistani	23,668	3.9
Traveller/Gypsy/Roma	1487	0.2
White British	382,340	62.7
White and Asian	6226	1.0
White and Black	11,055	1.8
White, any other	28,501	4.7
Total	609,682	100.0

Table 3. Background characteristics of pupils, KS2 2019, by ethnicity.

Ethnicity	FSM-Eligible%	English as First Language%	EHC%	SEND Support%	IDACI Score
Any other ethnicity	25.8	16.0	2.9	11.8	0.280
Asian, any other	14.4	22.9	2.6	8.6	0.232
Bangladeshi	22.2	9.8	3.5	11.1	0.310
Black—African	24.6	37.2	3.7	12.3	0.318
Black—Caribbean	31.1	95.8	4.5	21.1	0.305
Black, any other	26.5	60.8	4.2	14.8	0.308
Chinese	7.0	18.8	2.9	5.2	0.206
Indian	6.5	26.7	2.0	7.1	0.196
Mixed, any other	21.2	72.8	3.9	13.4	0.229
Not obtained, or refused	19.0	31.9	2.0	6.3	0.200
Pakistani	18.9	20.2	3.3	13.5	0.261
Traveller/Gypsy/Roma	43.3	56.4	4.1	30.4	0.276
White British	16.3	99.3	3.5	15.7	0.183
White and Asian	17.6	81.9	2.6	11.5	0.189
White and Black	29.7	90.0	4.1	17.4	0.254
White, any other	8.9	18.9	2.4	11.3	0.237
Total	17.0	78.2	3.4	14.5	0.207

Table 4. Background characteristics of pupils, KS4 2019, by ethnicity.

Ethnicity	FSM-Eligible%	English as First Language%	EHC%	SEN Support%	IDACI Score
Any other ethnicity	24.8	22.3	9.2	2.9	0.277
Asian, any other	12.7	30.4	5.3	2.4	0.226
Bangladeshi	25.4	19.2	8.6	3.3	0.308
Black—African	21.9	44.6	8.8	3.3	0.316
Black—Caribbean	25.6	96.5	16.0	5.3	0.301
Black, any other	23.4	65.7	11.8	5.2	0.305
Chinese	6.5	30.9	5.3	2.7	0.193
Indian	7.0	39.5	5.5	1.8	0.194
Mixed, any other	19.0	75.0	10.5	3.7	0.230
Not obtained, or refused	16.7	7.9	1.2	0.4	0.204
Pakistani	19.9	34.4	9.4	3.4	0.260
Traveller/Gypsy/Roma	36.5	41.2	20.8	8.5	0.298
White British	13.0	99.5	12.0	4.2	0.176
White and Asian	14.3	85.8	9.7	2.6	0.183
White and Black	25.3	91.1	13.5	5.0	0.249
White, any other	9.1	23.2	8.5	2.3	0.241
Total	74.9	14.4	10.1	3.5	0.200

5.2. School Outcomes

5.2.1. Exclusions

At the end of KS2, only 130 pupils in the whole cohort had been permanently excluded from a school, of which 88 were White British and 11 of unknown ethnicity. All other ethnic groups had 0, 1, 2, or 3 cases. None of these exclusions were for racist abuse. Most were for persistent disruptive behaviour or physical assault on an adult. Of the 130 cases, 100 (or 77%) were students listed as having a special educational need or disability. This is a very high proportion.

At the end of KS4, 762 pupils had been permanently excluded from a school, of which 414 were White British and 183 of unknown ethnicity. Two exclusions were for racist abuse, one involving a White British and one a Traveller pupil. Again, most exclusions were for persistent disruptive behaviour or physical assault on an adult. Of the 762 cases, 511 (or 67%) students were listed as having a special educational need or disability. It is clear that school exclusions are strongly linked to SEN status, in a way that is not usually portrayed in media or social media discussions.

The ethnic group with the most school exclusions at primary school, in some way, is the Traveller group. This is a small group, which needs to be examined in more detail. Otherwise, exclusions at the primary level are most common for mixed White and Black, and Black Caribbean, children (Table 5). Exclusions are almost non-existent for Asian other, Bangladeshi, Chinese, and Indian pupils. This pattern is similar to some extent to that of the poverty and other background characteristics of pupils in each ethnic group (above).

This pattern changes somewhat at secondary school, with White British pupils now most likely to have fixed exclusions, followed by the Traveller group, and “White and Asian”. However, the impression is that exclusions are more evenly spread across all ethnic groups at this age (Table 6). Ethnicity is not as important in explaining exclusions as SEN status is.

Table 5. Percentage school exclusions by ethnicity, KS2 2019.

Ethnicity	Total Fixed Exclusions	Total Fixed Sessions
Any other ethnicity	0.01	0.04
Asian, any other	0	0.02
Bangladeshi	0	0.02
Black—African	0.02	0.06
Black—Caribbean	0.04	0.17
Black, any other	0.02	0.09
Chinese	0	0.01
Indian	0	0.01
Mixed, any other	0.02	0.1
Null, not obtained, or refused	0.02	0.07
Pakistani	0.01	0.04
Traveller/Gypsy/Roma	0.12	0.44
White British	0.03	0.1
White and Asian	0.02	0.08
White and Black	0.05	0.18
White, any other	0.01	0.04
Total	0.20	0.09

Table 6. Percentage school exclusions by ethnicity, KS4 2019.

Ethnicity	Total Fixed Exclusions	Total Fixed Sessions
Any other ethnicity	1.57	7.71
Asian, any other	1.45	7.40
Bangladeshi	1.37	7.17
Black—African	1.40	6.89
Black—Caribbean	1.56	7.80
Black, any other	1.54	7.41
Chinese	1.67	7.33
Indian	1.24	6.28
Mixed, any other	1.69	7.74
Null, not obtained, or refused	1.86	8.63
Pakistani	1.53	7.54
Traveller/Gypsy/Roma	1.98	6.81
White British	2.01	7.71
White and Asian	1.85	8.16
White and Black	1.79	7.71
White, any other	1.75	7.41
Total	1.89	7.67

5.2.2. Attainment

There are some marked differences in attainment by ethnic group, again perhaps linked to poverty and other indicators of disadvantage. At KS1, after the first two years of primary school, Chinese and Indian children are already scoring better marks than all other ethnic groups, although the differences in attainment are not large, except with respect to Traveller children who have clearly the lowest average marks (Table 7). This pattern is repeated later at KS2 in reading, writing, and maths, along with “White and Asian” children scoring well in reading. This translates into positive value-added (progress) scores for the same groups, plus Bangladeshi, White other, and pupils of “any other” ethnicity.

Table 7. KS2 school outcomes, by ethnicity, 2019.

Ethnicity	KS1 Total Score	KS2 Reading Score	KS2 Writing Score	KS2 Maths Score	KS1-2 Value-Added Reading	KS1-2 Value-Added Writing	KS1-2 Value-Added Maths
Any other ethnicity	15.65	101.75	100.37	104.56	0.133	0.219	0.420
Asian, any other	16.50	104.07	102.74	106.92	0.092	0.188	0.448
Bangladeshi	15.98	103.78	102.49	105.62	0.142	0.246	0.327
Black—African	16.07	103.33	101.82	104.47	0.073	0.138	0.140
Black—Caribbean	15.52	101.82	100.17	101.75	−0.084	−0.058	−0.226
Black, any other	15.63	102.17	100.63	102.92	0.014	0.059	−0.013
Chinese	17.25	106.52	104.65	110.47	0.193	0.248	0.728
Indian	17.06	105.55	103.84	107.98	0.113	0.164	0.421
Mixed, any other	16.36	104.29	102.35	104.79	0.091	0.092	0.058
Null, not obtained, or refused	16.08	102.51	98.86	103.06	−0.007	−0.143	−0.134
Pakistani	15.55	102.35	101.02	104.08	0.031	0.109	0.195
Traveller/Gypsy/Roma	11.84	92.53	91.64	94.23	−0.163	−0.105	−0.148
White British	16.31	103.75	101.73	104.01	−0.039	−0.059	−0.097
White and Asian	16.83	105.51	103.36	106.03	0.108	0.087	0.107
White and Black	15.95	103.05	100.99	102.86	−0.019	−0.052	−0.170
White, any other	15.62	102.51	100.99	104.68	0.192	0.246	0.401
Total mean	16.21	103.54	101.64	104.25	0	0	0

The same six groups tend to have the highest attainment subsequently at KS4 (Table 8). Chinese, Indian, Asian other, mixed White and Asian, and Bangladeshi pupils recorded the highest Attainment 8 scores (average of best 8 GCSE scores or equivalent). The lowest scores were again for Travellers and Black Caribbean students. In terms of progress since KS2, the highest Progress 8 scores (whether a pupil scored better or worse in Attainment 8 than their prior attainment would predict) were for Chinese, Indian, other Asian, and Bangladeshi students. White British students had a substantial negative progress score, as did White and Black, Black Caribbean, and Traveller students.

Table 8. KS4 school outcomes, by ethnicity, 2019.

Ethnicity	KS4 Total Points	KS4 Capped Points	Attainment 8	Progress 8
Any other ethnicity	39.68	36.41	46.87	0.369
Asian, any other	47.40	42.21	54.24	0.551
Bangladeshi	42.37	39.02	50.29	0.420
Black—African	39.23	36.37	47.02	0.256
Black—Caribbean	30.91	29.45	38.51	−0.365
Black, any other	34.72	32.58	42.09	−0.003
Chinese	58.29	50.47	64.20	0.723
Indian	50.61	44.79	57.22	0.613
Mixed, any other	41.16	37.61	48.42	0.074
Null, not obtained, or refused	25.63	24.78	29.61	−0.161
Pakistani	38.09	35.42	45.90	0.208
Traveller/Gypsy/Roma	14.42	14.08	18.83	−0.699
White British	38.00	35.22	45.65	−0.179
White and Asian	45.57	41.02	52.57	0.166
White and Black	34.47	32.33	42.02	−0.315
White, any other	39.55	36.16	46.39	0.313
Total	37.26	34.53	44.40	−0.069

Although value-added scores like Progress 8 are intended to be independent of background factors, it is not clear that they are and they must be used with caution (Gorard, 2018).

As presaged by Tables 3 and 4, raw attainment scores are, like school exclusions, related to socioeconomic and other factors and are not intended to be attributed to ethnicity alone or at all (Gorard, 2021; Gorard et al., 2022). Poverty is common in student groups where attainment is low, and school exclusion is disproportionately higher. The rest of the paper looks at some of these other factors and their link to the surface or apparent ethnic attainment gap in England.

5.3. Poverty and Other Forms of Segregation

Bangladeshi and Pakistani students tend to be the most clustered within schools with other minority ethnic students, both in primary and secondary schools (Tables 9 and 10). These two minority ethnic groups are also the most clustered in schools in terms of FSM eligibility, along with Traveller, Black Caribbean, and Black African students. Chinese, Indian, and mixed White and Asian pupils attend the least segregated schools in terms of most indicators, except in relation to English as a second or additional language.

Table 9. Clustering of pupil characteristics in primary schools, segregation residuals, KS2 2019.

Ethnicity	FSM-Eligible	EAL	SEN	Ethnicity
Any other ethnicity	0.0000270	0.0001827	−0.0000186	0.0001102
Asian, any other	0.0000021	0.0001624	−0.0000262	0.0000992
Bangladeshi	0.0000494	0.0003023	−0.0000229	0.0001635
Black—African	0.0000299	0.0001617	−0.0000161	0.0001108
Black—Caribbean	0.0000315	0.0001392	−0.0000141	0.0001165
Black, any other	0.0000301	0.0001176	−0.0000151	0.0000876
Chinese	−0.0000088	0.0000435	−0.0000247	0.0000269
Indian	−0.0000152	0.0001983	−0.0000341	0.0001194
Mixed, any other	0.0000019	0.0000637	−0.0000208	0.0000458
Null, not obtained, or refused	0.0000023	0.0001066	0.0000441	0.0000552
Pakistani	0.0000299	0.0002788	−0.0000202	0.0001598
Traveller/Gypsy/Roma	0.0000371	0.0001228	−0.0000079	0.0000633
White British	−0.0000110	−0.0000320	−0.0000200	−0.0000314
White and Asian	−0.0000119	0.0000439	−0.0000243	0.0000292
White and Black	0.0000106	0.0000482	−0.0000181	0.0000391
White, any other	0.0000026	0.0000995	−0.0000206	0.0000598
Total	−0.0000027	0.0000303	−0.0000193	0.0000109

Table 10. Clustering of pupil characteristics in secondary schools, segregation residuals, KS4 2019.

Ethnicity	FSM-Eligible	EAL	SEN	Ethnicity
Any other ethnicity	0.0001022	0.0004661	0.0000216	0.0003549
Asian, any other	−0.0000250	0.0003435	−0.0000163	0.0002932
Bangladeshi	0.0002403	0.0007639	0.0000288	0.0005187
Black—African	0.0000948	0.0004217	0.0000158	0.0003735
Black—Caribbean	0.0001131	0.0003474	0.0000390	0.0003771
Black, any other	0.0000998	0.0002877	0.0000294	0.0002810
Chinese	−0.0000713	0.0000593	−0.0000331	0.0000836
Indian	−0.0000400	0.0004591	−0.0000306	0.0003893
Mixed, any other	0.0000015	0.0001477	0.0000040	0.0001621
Null, not obtained, or refused	−0.0000093	0.0000530	0.0000617	0.0000945
Pakistani	0.0001205	0.0005687	0.0000050	0.0004414
Traveller/Gypsy/Roma	0.0001584	0.0003011	0.0000821	0.0001851
White British	−0.0000682	−0.0001572	−0.0000074	−0.0001326
White and Asian	−0.0000669	0.0000524	−0.0000085	0.0000738
White and Black	0.0000145	0.0000969	0.0000195	0.0001193
White, any other	0.0000140	0.0002153	0.0000162	0.0001707
Total	−0.0000313	−0.0000029	−0.0000011	−0.0000026

As has been shown, there are some ethnic groups who tend to be poorer, live in poorer areas, go to school with others like them, are more often excluded from school, and have lower average attainment. These include Black Caribbean and Travellers. On the other hand, Chinese and Indian pupils have an almost opposite profile in England. We next use all of the variables considered so far to examine the raw score outcome gaps, by ethnicity, in more detail.

5.4. Regression Modelling

This section presents four linear regression models, for attainment outcomes and total exclusions, for both KS2 (age 11) and KS4 (age 16). The same predictors are used in each model entered in four blocks—individual pupil characteristics, prior attainment described so far, school-level characteristics, and individual ethnicity. Individual pupil characteristics include SEND, FSM, age, sex, and ethnicity. Ethnicity is covered by a series of flag variables, such as being White British, or not. This is not the best practice for linear regression analyses, which are intended to work with real numbers (Gorard, 2021), but as seen below this does not make much difference in practice.

In each block, the predictors are entered using a forward stepwise approach, in order to create the simplest model. The school-level characteristics are the mean school attainment and the four segregation residuals (shown in Tables 9 and 10). The ethnicity flags are entered last to help gauge the link to outcomes once all other factors have been taken into account.

5.4.1. Attainment

Table 11 shows the model predicting pupils' attainment at the end of primary school. KS2 outcomes can be explained with $R = 0.86$ using seven predictors. All other predictors—such as whether the pupil has English as an additional language (EAL), and the segregation residuals of having EAL, FSM-eligible, and non-White pupils in their school—were not retained in the model (i.e., they did not improve the model either separately or together).

Table 11. Regression model predicting KS2 points.

Step	R	R increase	Standardised Coefficient
<i>Background</i>			
SEND flag	0.541	0.541	−0.152
FSM flag	0.556	0.015	−0.035
Age	0.559	0.003	−0.031
Sex flag	0.561	0.002	−0.020
<i>Prior attainment</i>			
KS1 average points	0.827	0.266	+0.638
<i>School-level characteristics</i>			
KS2 mean	0.856	0.029	+0.270
SEND segregation residual	0.857	0.001	+0.054

Whether a pupil was listed as having a special educational need or disability (SEND) was the most powerful predictor of KS2 outcomes, followed by prior attainment (KS1 score), and then mean school attainment (a kind of peer effect). Once these have been taken into account, none of the ethnic group flags makes any difference to the accuracy of the

prediction. Despite surface differences, pupil ethnicity is not a factor in KS2 attainment, once background and prior attainment are accounted for.

At KS4, the outcomes can be predicted with $R = 0.80$, using eight predictors (Table 12). All other predictors—including the segregation residuals for EAL, FSM-eligible, and boys in the school—were not retained in the model. Again, there was no role for ethnicity here, and the ethnicity flags (such as Chinese or not) were not retained in the model once SEND, poverty, prior attainment, and other factors had been accounted for. Again, individual SEND status and prior attainment were the key predictors.

Table 12. Regression model predicting KS4 points.

Step	R	R Increase	Standardised Coefficient
<i>Background</i>			
SEND flag	0.386	0.386	−0.085
FSM flag	0.430	0.044	−0.080
Sex flag	0.443	0.013	−0.115
EAL flag	0.447	0.004	+0.065
Age	0.448	0.001	−0.023
<i>Prior attainment</i>			
KS2 points	0.775	0.327	+0.618
<i>School-level characteristics</i>			
KS4 school mean	0.799	0.024	+0.221
SEND segregation residual	0.800	0.001	+0.031

Attainment at KS2 and KS4 is mainly explained by prior attainment and SEND. FSM and sex can also be seen as important predictors. Once accounted for, there is little or no role for ethnicity in attainment outcomes. The apparent ethnic attainment gap disappears. This suggests that the differences between ethnic groups in terms of background characteristics, as noted in this paper, can explain the differences in attainment.

5.4.2. Exclusions

The models predicting total exclusions, using the items available in NPD, are much weaker than those for attainment. The number of pupils ever excluded is low. The model for total exclusions at the end of KS2, using the same predictors as the model for attainment, has $R = 0.14$ (Table 13). The model did not retain pupil age, the ethnicity flag, whether they have English as an additional language (EAL flag), or the segregation residual of pupils in the school having EAL. Again, although there are clear differences between ethnic groups in terms of exclusions, these disappear when other factors are considered and with ethnicity only portrayed as a White or non-White flag. The sole predictor with a substantial link to exclusions is SEND, which could partly involve behavioural problems.

The model predicting total exclusions at KS4 is only slightly stronger than at KS2 ($R = 0.20$). It does not retain pupil age, sex, or the segregation residual for SEND (Table 14). The predictors with substantial links to exclusions are again SEND, FSM, and prior attainment. If they are explicable, school exclusions would have to be largely explained using information other than that available in the NPD. The use of distinct flag variables depicting the ethnicity of each pupil does not help to predict exclusion levels for individuals, once

these background variables are controlled for. As with attainment at KS2, the surface differences in outcomes by ethnicity disappear here.

Table 13. Regression model prediction KS2 total exclusions.

Step	R	R Increase	Standardised Coefficient
<i>Background</i>			
SEND flag	0.109	0.109	+0.101
FSM flag	0.122	0.013	+0.050
Sex flag	0.131	0.009	+0.046
Age	0.132	0.001	+0.007
<i>Prior attainment</i>			
KS1 average points	0.136	0.004	+0.029
<i>School-level characteristics</i>			
KS2 school mean	0.138	0.002	−0.039
FSM segregation residual	0.139	0.001	+0.027

Table 14. Regression model prediction KS4 total exclusions.

Step	R	R Increase	Standardised Coefficient
<i>Background</i>			
SEND flag	0.108	0.108	+0.055
EAL flag	0.125	0.017	−0.007
FSM flag	0.137	0.012	+0.040
<i>Prior attainment</i>			
KS2 score	0.180	0.043	−0.038
<i>School-level characteristics</i>			
KS4 school mean	0.197	0.017	−0.039
FSM segregation residual	0.203	0.006	−0.063
EAL segregation residual	0.204	0.001	+0.039

6. Discussion

Prior attainment and SEND status emerge as the main drivers/predictors of attainment at KS2 and KS4. Socioeconomic status (as indicated by FSM eligibility) also helped explain attainment outcomes. However, there is no clear relationship between individual pupil ethnicity and attainment outcomes, once other background factors are accounted for. If accepted, this finding should influence how attainment gaps are addressed. These gaps are not primarily an issue related to minority ethnic status, and so ethnicity is not in itself a lever for improvement. Instead, extra assistance (i.e., even more than at present) could be channelled to pupils with SEND and/or those with low attainment due to poverty. Pupil Premium funding in England partly addresses this, but perhaps needs to be calibrated better to reach areas of most disadvantage, and certainly needs to be used better by schools (Gorard et al., 2022).

At the end of Key Stage 2 (KS2) and Key Stage 4 (KS4), the situation for permanent exclusions from school is similar. Exclusions are primarily associated with pupils' having reported special educational needs or disabilities (SENDs). Students with SEND are much more likely to face permanent exclusion compared to those without such needs. Although the overall numbers are relatively small nationally, there is an indication here that SEND pupils may not always be being treated appropriately. Exclusion is not a suitable first response to a learning challenge. Instead, and after consideration, alternatives to exclusion for affected children could be sought and promoted. Many Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) do an excellent job with older pupils, and for some, there is also the option of an early entry to a Further Education (FE) College. But such alternatives do not exist for younger (primary-age) pupils ([The Children's Society, 2022](#)).

Again, there is no role for ethnicity in explaining exclusion outcomes, once other factors are accounted for. This is surprising for some ([Demie, 2022b](#)). It is possible to explain the surface differences in both types of school outcomes between ethnic groups of pupils in terms of other factors, such as whether a student has a recognised special education need, and whether they live in poverty. This finding is not new (e.g., [Gorard, 2018](#), but it is an important one for the larger project we are working on. Our next step is to consider the importance of the congruence of the ethnicity of teachers and their students in each school, by linking these NPD data with the individual School Workforce Census.

In each model presented here, part of the explanation for the differences in outcomes lies in the extent of segregation experienced by each pupil in their school. This applies chiefly to the clustering of pupils by FSM status, SEND, and perhaps EAL, or even ethnicity. The correlation is relatively small (judged in terms of the R value), but in some ways, this clustering might be the easiest barrier to address, in order to improve both attainment and exclusions.

Our work and that of others have shown that the clustering of pupils by poverty tends to be damaging to the school system, inhibiting attainment, and is linked to a larger poverty attainment gap ([Gorard, 2018](#); [Sciffer et al., 2021](#); [Gorard et al., 2022](#)). It reduces national and regional social and ethnic cohesion and tends to lower aspiration, expectations, and participation for individuals ([Horgan, 2007](#)). The same pattern applies to clustering by SEND and ethnicity ([Danhier, 2018](#); [Hewstone et al., 2018](#)).

We have shown elsewhere that the ethnic mix of pupils in a school can be an attractor to minority ethnic teachers for working in a school or for retaining them in the teaching profession overall ([Gorard et al., 2024](#)). And increasing the ethnic diversity of staff in more schools could have benefits for minority ethnic attainment in England ([Daniels, 2022](#); [Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2022](#); [Woods, 2023](#)).

Pupils' school experience and attainment outcomes should not be determined by the area they live in and the school they attend. So, whatever this paper and the next stages in the bigger project show, the school system should work towards inclusive integration of diverse pupils. Tackling the clustering of socioeconomic disadvantage within schools, as a priority, can help to reduce many of the surface-level disparities.

In the medium term, it would be hard to fundamentally shift the regional and residential segregation of ethnic groups in England, with the North East mostly having White British pupils, and Inner London having White British pupils in a minority, for example. However, within that regionally segregated residential system, there is still additional and needless clustering by ethnicity at the school level. To change this requires schools and networks of schools to act differently, just as they appear to have done with poorer children since the introduction of Pupil Premium funding ([Gorard et al., 2022](#)). The range of types of schools in the national system needs to be reduced or eliminated, especially the use of religious faith as a criterion for admissions to schools. This is strongly linked to

segregation between schools by ethnicity, in the same way that selection by “ability” leads to segregation by poverty.

Further evidence-led suggestions for reducing segregation by SEND, FSM, and ethnicity would involve further changes to the rules governing the allocation of school places. All distance from home and ease of travel criteria could be removed. There should be no dedicated feeder primary schools for secondary school entry. All of these currently encourage the automatic duplication of local residential segregation within schools. At least temporarily in the areas with the most stubborn segregation problems, authorities can expand the successes of admissions lotteries (Millar, 2017) or bussing pupils to school (Browne-Marshall, 2019).

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