British-Chinese Pupils’ Constructions of Gender and Learning

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Abstract

British-Chinese pupils are the highest achieving ethnic group in the British educational system, and British-Chinese boys’ performance equals that of girls. This paper investigates aspects of British-Chinese pupils’ constructions of learning, focusing particularly on subject preferences and their constructions of themselves as pupils. The results are analysed according to gender as well as social class, and demonstrate that British-Chinese pupils’ constructions of gender, subject preference and self-image as pupils differ in some respects from those of pupils from other ethnic groups. Reasons for such differences
are considered, and the paper also reflects on the implications of these findings in relation to broader findings concerning the stereotyping and ‘othering’ of the British-Chinese within the British education system.

British-Chinese Pupils’ Constructions of Gender and Learning

Background

British-Chinese pupils tend to obtain very high achievement within the British education system (Gilborn & Gipps, 1996; Pang, 1999, DfEE, 2001). In terms of achievement in GCSE exams at 16 (marking the end of compulsory education in Britain) they out-perform all other ethnic groups (Pang, 1999, DFES, 2004). Recent figures show that 75% of Chinese children gain five or more GCSE A*-C passes, compared with 51% of white pupils (DfES, 2004). It has been noted that British Chinese young people have among the highest proportional rates of progression into post-compulsory education (Owen, 1994; Gilborn & Gipps 1996). This represents an impressive and swift development within a short space of time: writing in the mid-1980s, Taylor (1987) found that few Chinese in Britain progressed to higher education. Clearly a new generation of British-born Chinese have made rapid educational progress. Moreover, the British-Chinese are also distinctive in terms of patterns around gender and achievement. Concerns about ‘boys’ educational underachievement’ remain an ongoing theme in the British academic and popular press (Epstein et al., 1998; Francis, 2000; Skelton, 2001), primarily due to girls’ general out-performance of boys at GCSE level, particularly in the area of English and languages. Yet in the case of the British-Chinese, figures show that boys continue to match the educational performance of their female counterparts (Gilborn & Gipps, 1996, The Times, 2004).
However, whereas the perceptions and experiences of education among various other groups of minority ethnic pupils in Britain have been explored to some extent in qualitative studies (eg. Mirza, 1992; Basit, 1997; Sewell, 1996; Archer 2003), British-Chinese pupils remain relatively invisible within social and educational theory and research. British-Chinese pupils have not been positioned as educationally or socially problematic to the same extent as other minority ethnic groups, and hence to some extent the lack of commentary might be explained by a lack of concern. On the one hand such a lack of concern might be read as positive, given the considerable injustices associated with pathologising culturalist discourses (Archer, 2003). However, even seemingly ‘positive’ stereotypes of ethnic groups can serve to homogenise the diverse experiences of those drawn within its boundaries, masking issues of inequality (Tam, 1998). Moreover, as we observe elsewhere, all stereotypes, positive or negative, can provide the fabric for racist re-readings and pathologisation (Archer & Francis, 2005; Francis & Archer, 2005a). Parker (2000) is thus rightly critical of the way in which the Chinese ‘community’ in Britain has tended to be simplistically presented as a ‘success’ story. He observes that in constructing the British-Chinese community as an ‘economic success story’, Anglo researchers have ignored discrimination, difficulties and inequalities besetting many Chinese in Britain. Researchers such as Wong (1994), Parker (2000) and Chau & Yu (2001) argue that this crude presentation of the Chinese as an economic success story is based on popular Western stereotypes of the Chinese as conformist, collectivist, deferent, entrepreneurial, and conforming to Confucian values, which ignore the specific British-Chinese construction of ethnic identity (Parker, 2000).

As we have discussed elsewhere (Francis & Archer, 2005a), these perceptions seem to be reflected in some accounts of British-Chinese approaches to learning, which suggest the latter to be unwholsomely deferent and conformist. For example, Sham and Woodrow (1998) (and Woodrow & Sham, 2001) maintain that British-Chinese pupils are conformist, deferent, and that these characteristics may impede their ‘growth’ (development); yet they present little evidence to support such claims. Likewise, we found that many British teachers hold extremely stereotypical views of British-Chinese pupils as reflecting the characteristics identified by Chau & Yu (2001) and others observed above (Archer & Francis, 2005a). The perceived deference, conformity and diligence of British-Chinese pupils meant that although perceived as ‘good’ pupils by teachers, they were often positioned as ‘a bit too good/boring’ by teachers. (We draw attention to the way in which these discourses are gendered, with constructions of British-Chinese boys and girls sharing similarities with teachers’ perceptions of girls more generally as achieving through hard-work rather than natural talent, and [white] boys as naturally talented but lazy (Walkerdine, 1989; Archer & Francis, 2005; Francis & Archer, 2005b; Skelton & Francis, 2003).

It was sometimes implied that their high achievement was due to (excessive) pressure from parents, evoking the notion of ‘oppressive home cultures’ (Brah, 1994). Hence Verma et al. (1994) have shown how the dominance of the ‘compensatory’ perspective in education (Siraj-Blatchford, 1993) has resulted in ethnic minority groups being perceived in terms of deficit, irrespective of their performance. The project described in this paper thus represents an attempt to contribute to a more critical body of work concerning British Chinese pupils and their educational ‘success’, and to explore British-Chinese constructions of education in relation to gender and social class.

In this paper we attend to British-Chinese pupils’ approaches to learning. There is substantial evidence that different ethnic groups (and different social class fractions within those groups) place varying degrees of emphasis upon educational success (eg. Phoenix, 1987; Reay, 1998; Basit, 1997; Walkerdine et al, 2001). It has been observed that, while most
social and ethnic groups welcome educational achievement as positive and potentially beneficial, they may prioritise it to different extents, and vary in the material and discursive social capital they are able to mobilise in order to ensure such educational success (Reay, 1998; Reay et al., 2001). Education as a concept of value appears particularly important to Chinese in Britain of all social classes (Francis & Archer, 2005a). Pang (1999) and others maintain that a high valuing of education represents a pillar of Chinese culture, a view supported by Taylor (1987) who notes that teachers and scholars have traditionally been highly respected in the Chinese community. Chinese parents’ emphasis on their children’s educational success is apparent from the stress placed on this issue in their personal testimonies (ECOHP, 1994), and in interviews (Francis & Archer, 2005a). Indeed we have argued elsewhere that the discourse of ‘Chinese value of education’ is marshalled and reproduced by the Chinese in Britain to delineate their (relational) Chinese diasporic identities (Francis & Archer, 2005a).

However, little work has examined British-Chinese pupils’ actual approaches to learning, or their perceptions of themselves as learners. Sham & Woodrow’s (1998; Woodrow & Sham, 2001) study, one of a very small number of studies to have investigated attitudes to education among British-Chinese pupils, asked pupils about their preferred learning styles and perceptions of the educational environment. Their findings suggest that these pupils may adopt different learning styles to their Anglo counterparts. Chan’s (2000) work suggests that British-Chinese pupils have high self-esteem in relation to education: higher than both their white British and Hong Kong Chinese counterparts. This paper hopes to shed further light in this area around British-Chinese pupils’ constructions of learning, and particularly to contribute an analysis in terms of gender and social class. It focuses particularly on British-Chinese pupils’ favourite and least favourite subjects, and their constructions of themselves as learners. In doing so findings are related to previous research published in this journal, which explored some of these factors with a sample of pupils from diverse ethnic groups (Francis, 2000b).

Methods

The data is drawn from an ESRC-funded study titled ‘British-Chinese pupils’ constructions of education, gender, and post-16 pathways’ (grant no. R000239585). As Ali (2003) observes, there are problems with the identification of individuals in terms of their ethnicity, which often involves ‘creeping essentialism’ concerning race. In this research project, respondents were involved on the basis that they self-defined their ethnic identity as ‘Chinese’ (and/or ‘British-Chinese). A few were half-Vietnamese, and some were ethnic Chinese whose families had lived in Vietnam or other countries before emigrating to the UK. Hence when referring to ‘Chinese’ or ‘British-Chinese’ in this paper we refer to their personally-constructed ethnicity.

The research was carried out in London, where almost half the total Chinese population in Britain are concentrated (Chau & Yu, 2001). Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with three different groups: pupils of Chinese origin, their parents, and their teachers. The data presented here is drawn from the pupil interviews.

80 British-Chinese pupils (48 girls, 32 boys) from Years 10 and 11 (14-16 year olds) were interviewed. Francis (eg 2000) and Archer’s (eg 2003) previous investigations of students’ constructions of gender and learning also involved 14-16 year olds; so the inclusion of this age-group in the proposed study enabled comparisons between the constructions of British-Chinese pupils and pupils from other ethnic groups. Accessing a sample of this size was extremely onerous, as, even in
London, few schools contain high proportions of British-Chinese pupils. The 26 schools in the sample were mainly state schools but also included two independent (private) schools. All Year 10 and 11 British-Chinese pupils within these schools were invited to participate in the research (ensuring that pupils from different ability groups were represented). Social class membership in the sample was highly diverse. Categorised by the highest level job among parents, there were 40 broadly middle class pupils (whose parent/s were either professional, middle-class service workers, or owned or managed a business); 22 clearly working-class pupils (whose parent/s were either manual workers or unemployed); 12 pupils whose parent/s are restaurant chefs (as opposed to take-away chefs, and indicating that they are broadly working class, but usually highly skilled and potentially highly paid). The parental occupation of a further 6 pupils was unclear.

Most of the pupils were second-generation Chinese with parents from the New Territories of Hong Kong or Hong Kong Island. But there were some third-generation pupils whose parents had been born or grown up in Britain; pupils from mainland China; and pupils whose parents hailed from ethnic Chinese communities living in other countries. Pupils were questioned about their perceptions of gender issues, their educational preferences and experiences, attitudes to learning, and their educational and occupational aspirations post-16.

The interviews were carried out by the authors; both white, middle-class women. Clearly, our ethnicity raises issues in the context of interviewing British-Chinese pupils. We recognise that the dominance of ‘ethnicity research’ by white researchers has contributed to the (re)production of oppressive theories that problematise minority groups. However, we would argue that the notion of ‘matching’ researcher and respondent gender, ethnicity or other variables evokes a problematic perception of fixed and two-dimensional identity. As we have observed elsewhere (Francis & Archer, 2005a), ‘matching’ researcher and respondents does not guarantee good research for two main reasons. Firstly, it is impossible to match all factors of identity (Archer, 2002). Secondly such a ‘matching’ approach does not eradicate power relations, which persist between researchers/participants despite shared ethnicity (Phoenix, 1994; Song & Parker, 1995, Reay, 1996). Therefore it is argued here that the conduct of the interviews by white researchers is not necessarily more problematic than by Chinese researchers. The researchers do, however, recognise the power relations and potential effects involved, and have therefore tried to be sensitive to, and reflexive on, these issues in the research.

Pseudonyms have been used for all schools and pupils to ensure anonymity (pupil pseudonyms are English, Chinese or Vietnamese as appropriate to the original name supplied). Interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed, and processed via the NVivo package. A social constructionist perspective has been applied to the data, the qualitative analysis of which involved content analysis and analysis of discourse (Burman and Parker, 1993; Francis, 1999). We also provide figures to ensure that readers of the research findings can ascertain the extent to which particular expressions among the pupils are representative of the total sample (Silverman, 1993).

### British-Chinese pupils’ choices of favourite and least favourite subject

One of our questions asked respondents what their favourite subjects at school are, and another asked which are their least favourites. The pupils’ explanations for their favourites were usually that these subjects are interesting, fun, easy, or the teacher particularly engaging. Table 1 sets out their favourite subjects, ranked according to the number of choices, and
divided according to gender. In examining the table there are some complexities to bear in mind: there are more female than male respondents (48:32), and where a couple did not identify any subjects, many pupils chose more than one. Moreover, while many English schools have generic ‘Double Science’ as part of their GCSE curriculum, some schools teach the science subjects separately, with the result that some pupils have identified various science disciplines (‘chemistry’ etc) while the majority refer simply to ‘science’. While it would be possible to lump these separate choices in with ‘science’, there are gender implications in the choices (e.g. girls tend traditionally to enjoy and pursue biology, and boys chemistry and physics) which are pertinent and which would be hidden by condensing these choices together.

Table 1 here

Several things are striking about these results. The first is the clear preference for maths, which is the most popular subject among girls, as well as boys. (Although proportionally more so for boys, among whom nearly two-thirds have identified it as a favourite subject). Maths has traditionally been constructed as masculine (Walkerdine, 1988; 1989; Mendick, forthcoming); and has traditionally been less enjoyed by girls (Spender, 1982; Whitehead, 1996), although evidence suggests that this may be beginning to change (Wikeley & Stables, 1999; Francis, 2000b; Francis et al, 2003). The second noticeable trend is a general liking for traditionally masculine subjects among both British-Chinese girls and boys (see Walkerdine, 1988; Harding, 1991; Thomas, 1990; or Francis, 2000b, for a discussion of gendered subjects). Their four top subjects are the same, albeit science and art switch places between second and third favourite in boys and girls’ preferences. Science features prominently in their choices, as do ‘technical’ subjects such as Graphics, Design Technology and IT. Art is a common choice among both boys and girls, and English is also represented on the lists. However, compare the choices of favourites with a mixed ethnicity sample of 100 London pupils in the same age-group iv, drawn from a previous study of gender and learning (Francis, 2000b). It represents the top four subject choices of all groups:

Table 2 here

Even keeping in mind that many pupils chose more than one subject, and that there are fewer British-Chinese boys than in the other pupil groups, there are some clear, profound differences here. For example, the very low rating for English among British-Chinese girls and boys in comparison with other groups of pupils (where both boys and girls in the mixed-ethnicity groups voted English as a favourite most frequently, hence in the boys’ case bucking previous gender trends, see Francis, 2000b). It should not be assumed that this is explained by British-Chinese having English as a second language, as for a vast majority English is their primary language, albeit often not the one they learnt first (many spoke Cantonese, Hakka or Mandarin with their parents). Maths stands out as a particular favourite of British-Chinese boys: where less than half of pupils in the other groups rated maths a favourite, nearly two-thirds of British-Chinese boys chose it iv. Both British-Chinese girls and boys are more likely to rate science as a favourite than are other groups. There is proportional similarity in the ratings for art and for IT between groups, but there are clear dissonances concerning the interaction between gender and ethnicity in relation to both drama and PE. In the case of drama, British-Chinese of both genders are less likely to choose drama as a favourite than are their mixed-ethnicity group counterparts, but this difference is particularly striking among the girls. Conversely, there is a dramatic difference between boys’ ratings for PE, with far fewer British-Chinese boys rating this as a favourite subject than the mixed-ethnicity boys. These latter findings, coupled with the
general trend for British-Chinese girls to favour science/technical subjects rather than (gender-stereotypical) arts/humanities subjects, illustrates the way in which 'race' interweaves with gender in pupils' constructions of subject preference.

Ability is a further variable in subject choice, as some subjects are seen as more academically challenging than others. Our analysis is limited here because (reflecting the tendency to high achievement among British-Chinese) an unusually large proportion of our sample were from highest achieving 'streams'. There were an additional number who were in top sets for some subjects and lower sets for others (often top for maths and lower for English, interestingly reflecting the pattern of subject preferences); and a handful in middle or middle/lower streams. Maths, art and science appear to be evenly represented as favourites across these groups, except in the case of British-Chinese girls' choices of science, where only one girl from a lower band chose it as a favourite subject.

Table 3 depicts the British-Chinese pupils' least favourite subjects.

Table 3 here

Here the choices were slightly more 'traditional' in terms of least favourite subject, except in the case of the representation of English among British-Chinese girls' most frequently noted worst subject. British-Chinese boys' choices could be seen as more gender-traditionally patterned than the mixed-ethnicity group referred to above, where boys rated maths as least favourite more commonly than English (a traditionally 'feminine' subject). Table 4 displays the four most commonly noted least favourites by British-Chinese pupils in contrast with the mixed-ethnicity group:

Table 4 here

What is immediately noticeable here is that there are far fewer counts of least favourite subjects among the British-Chinese pupils than in the case with the mixed group. For example, although maths was the least favourite subject among British-Chinese girls, double the number of girls in the mixed-ethnicity group rated it their least favourite (although this is not true of girls in single-sex schools, Francis et al, 2003). This pattern was further exacerbated in the case of science. And the mixed-ethnicity group boys were almost four times as likely to dislike French than were their British-Chinese contemporaries: this is particularly interesting given that the British-Chinese boys' lesser enthusiasm for English might have been expected to translate to other languages. So perhaps the key finding here is that the British-Chinese pupils are generally less negative about curriculum subjects.

Again, there was little clear distinction across ability sets in terms of least favourite subjects, with ratings for the most frequently noted least-favourites being fairly evenly spread across ability streams. As we have noted (and will discuss further later in this article) issues of ethnicity and gender are threaded through the pupils' preferences in relation to education. A preference for maths appears to be an example here, as the particular approach to maths in Chinese families (and consequent preference for maths among young Chinese) has been noted elsewhere (Ran, 2001), and was referred to by some of the pupils themselves. Yet there were also a few pragmatic examples of how the British curriculum may take a 'Eurocentric' stance which does not always accommodate cultural difference. For example, asked why she had identified
Religious Education (R.E) as her least favourite subject, ChingChing (Butcher Comprehensive School) replies, “Cos I think I don’t have that cultural background”. The interviewer asks,

I: Aren’t they meant to look at all sorts of different religions and cultures, or does that not happen?
CC: Yeah, it doesn’t, no.
I: Ah, OK.
CC: They learn Christian, that’s it.

And asked why she does not enjoy Media Studies, Mary (The Roly School) explains,

‘Cos it’s mostly about TV, like chat show, and I don’t really watch English TV, ‘cos my family, my Mum and my Dad kinda can’t speak English so they watch like Chinese channel, so I have to watch it as well.

Pupil Constructions of Gender and Subject Ability

Of the 48 girls, 25 felt that both sexes are equally good at all subjects. Of the 32 boys, 15 agreed. So around half of British-Chinese girls and boys felt that the sexes are equally able. This proportion is somewhat lower than was the case for the ethnically diverse sample, where 75% of pupils said that the sexes have equal ability at all subjects. 23 (of 48) British-Chinese girls, and 11 (of 32) boys said that boys and girls are not equally able at all subjects. (6 boys, but no girls, gave unclear or equivocal answers). There was a fairly even representation of these responses according to social class, with similar proportions of middle-class and working-class boys and girls arguing both that the genders are equally able, and that they are not able. However, there was a difference in responses according to ability: although numbers representing different groups are very small (rendering these findings simply suggestive), there was a tendency for higher ability boys and girls to say that the genders are not equally able at different subjects. For example, 19 high ability girls, and only 4 lower ability girls, said that the genders are not equally able; compared to the 16 high ability girls and 9 low ability girls who said they are equally able.

Pupils who answered that the sexes are not equally able at all subjects were asked to list the curriculum subjects concerned and to explain their reasoning. 12 girls, and 6 boys, assigned stereotypically gendered subjects to the ‘appropriate’ sex, drawing on the narrative ‘The genders are better at different things’ (Francis, 2000b). For example, Maggie argues that “boys are better at sort of scientific subjects”, and Ricky that “girls better at languages and boys better at science”. In some of these cases only one or two subjects were picked out, with the British-Chinese respondents concerned asserting that generally the sexes are equally able, but that boys/girls excel at one or two subjects in particular (boys being better at P.E was a particularly common example). In other cases pupils had very detailed perceptions of a gender dichotomy which encompassed many different curriculum areas. For example, one girl maintained that boys are better at chemistry, physics and maths, and girls at all the ‘arts’ subjects and biology. Another claimed that boys are better at ‘electronics stuff’, where girls are better at textiles, design, geography, and all other ‘humanities’ subjects.
This latter example illustrates how in many cases it was not boys who were seen as more able, but girls. For example, two girls and three boys argued that girls are generally more able than boys; compared to only one boy and one girl who claimed that boys are generally more able than girls. The majority of these pupils who claimed that girls are more able cited girls’ focus and hard-working approach as an explanation. But there were also instances where this higher ability was presented as innate. For example, Chui (F, Albert Square School) explains, “scientists realised that females tend to be more intelligent than males, yeah.” A similar argument concerning innate ability was also applied to boys by one of the pupils who claimed boys are generally more able than girls. Hence the narratives of male/female superiority identified in the previous research (Francis, 2000b) were also mobilised in the talk of British-Chinese respondents.

Some British-Chinese pupils listed subjects which were non-gender-stereotypical as those which girls or boys excel at. For example, three pupils (two girls and one boy) argued that ‘females are better at maths’. Another boy argued that girls are better than boys are science. And one girl maintained that girls are better at all ‘academic’ subjects, where boys excel at ‘practical’ subjects. Interestingly though, all these examples relate to cases where girls were viewed as more able at subjects traditionally viewed as masculine - there were no cases in which boys were said to be better at subjects traditionally seen as feminine. This seems to us to reflect two trends found in our work with other groups of pupils. Firstly, that the discourse of ‘boys’ underachievement’ may in some cases be seeping in to pupils’ awareness and impacting on perceptions of gender and achievement (Francis, 2000). This hypothesis is supported by the common discursive construction produced by the British-Chinese and other pupils of ‘hard-working girls’. Secondly, that discourses of equality of opportunity tend to be applied to girls’ abilities rather than to those of boys.

In terms of the British-Chinese pupils’ explanations for their views of the genders as having different abilities, we have already seen that some drew on discourses of innate gender difference, arguing that girls or boys are ‘naturally’ more able than the opposite sex. Maggie (F, Fowler School) supports her argument that boys are better at science subjects by speculating that boys are “just more kind of logical”. And Ricky (M, Park Comprehensive) agrees that differences in ability are “Probably because of their brain”. An example of the ‘hard-working girls’ discourse is provided by Paul (Watts Independent School) who reflects, “I think mostly girls are probably, well they work harder I think, apart from a few boys, but I think girls tend to, well I think they get better test scores as well.” ‘Real life’ examples were frequently mobilised to justify views: MeiYee demonstrates her view that girls are better at maths and boys at science by explaining,

Because in our maths class there is more like, when we were in year nine we had like end of year tests, and there was like, I think there was eight or nine girls who got like higher marks and like really good marks. And the boys didn’t get as high. And in science it was the other way round.

But the majority of the pupils who maintained that girls and boys are better at different subjects explained this as resulting from the different interests and hobbies which girls and boys pursue according to their gender. Hence ChingChing (F, Butcher Comprehensive) says that girls are better at English and Maths, and boys at technology, because “boys like playing with toys and stuff, even now. But girls just like reading and stuff.” Bridget (Slater School for Girls) maintains that boys are better at PE “Because [it’s] their hobby, well boys would naturally like football and girls would like something a bit more arty.” Andrew’s (Walford School) explanation of why girls are apparently less able at IT is particularly vivid:
I don’t think much girls like computers and stuff but boys, they just love them, but girls just don’t even know what’s a game to play it. If you talk to them and go “well, like, this [has] got good graphics” and everything, they go “what?” They don’t understand a thing. So I think boys like different subjects, they really do, yeah.

Such arguments extend the narrative that ‘the genders are better at different things’, by maintaining that people ‘naturally’ have different interests according to gender (apparently resting on the discourse of innate gender differences).

**British-Chinese pupils’ constructions of themselves as pupils**

A high proportion of British-Chinese pupils gave a positive response to the question ‘Do you think you are a good pupil?’. 56 pupils (39 of the 48 girls, and 17 of the 32 boys) said that they consider themselves good pupils. Only four pupils (three girls and one boy) did not see themselves as a good pupil. A further 10 pupils argued that they were ‘average’ pupils, and another 10 pupils were equivocal or did not answer clearly. This is a very different picture to that presented by Francis’ previous research findings with an ethnically-diverse sample, discussed earlier (Francis, 2000). In that sample only 16 of 50 girls and 13 of 50 boys answered ‘yes’ when asked if they are good pupils. 11 girls, and 13 boys said ‘no’ (the rest replied either that they were unsure, or that they were average).

Clearly these positive responses from British-Chinese respondents included pupils from all social classes: this is an important point given that we might usually expect some working class pupils to be less educationally engaged/enfranchised than their middle-class counterparts (Reay, 2001). Of the four pupils who said they are not good pupils, two were broadly middle-class and two broadly working class. And of those who said they were ‘average’ or equivocal, only two were broadly working class. Generally these findings that British-Chinese pupils of all social classes are more likely than other pupils to see themselves as ‘good pupils’ appears to affirm our previous findings that British-Chinese pupils are particularly educationally-oriented, placing high currency on the value of education as specific to their (relational) Chinese identities (Francis & Archer, 2005a; Archer & Francis forthcoming). The comparatively high number responding that they are good pupils, and the very low number responding that they are not good pupils, evokes a relatively high level of confidence and self-affirmation among our sample in relation to their position as pupils. This lends support to Chan’s (2000) finding that British-Chinese pupils have high self-esteem generally, and particularly in relation to learning.

Chan (2000) found that in all the groups he studied (white-British, British-Chinese and Hong Kong Chinese), boys’ self-esteem concerning their learning was higher than that of girls. Although our question related to their perception of themselves as pupils rather than learners, it seems interesting that a higher proportion of girls in our study saw themselves as ‘good pupils’ than did boys. Seeing oneself as a good pupil would seem to suggest a certain self-confidence in ones’ construction of self as a pupil. On the other hand, perhaps our terminology might have created a gendered effect here: much evidence suggests that boys in and outside the UK seek to avoid being labelled as ‘boffins’ due to constructions of popular masculinity as opposed to learning (Francis, 1999, 2000; Martino, 1999; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Younger & Warrington, 1999). Although the terms ‘boffin’ and ‘swot’ have negative connotations when
applied to either sex, girls have been found to be less concerned by this than boys (Francis, 1999; Warrington & Younger, 2000). While we have found that some British-Chinese boys appear to be less anxious about association with learning than is the case for boys from some other ethnic groups (Francis & Archer, 2005b), this concern to construct masculinity by avoiding the appearance of working too hard remained a theme in the talk of many British-Chinese boys. Hence it may be that boys are less keen to construct themselves as ‘good pupils’ than are girls, given the possibly ‘boffin’-like connotations of this perception.

On the other hand, the level of self-assurance indicated by the particularly high proportion of British-Chinese girls who asserted they are ‘good pupils’, jars strikingly with the construction of British-Chinese girls by teachers. We found that British-Chinese girls were overwhelmingly presented by their teachers as uniformly passive and “unnecessarily quiet”, as well as hardworking and high-achieving (Archer & Francis, 2005). As with South Asian girls (see Brah, 1994), British-Chinese girls were positioned as victims of an ‘oppressive’ and ‘restricted’ home life, which resulted in their lack of voice. We argue further that due to teachers’ homogenising representation of British-Chinese girls as de-sexualised, silent and diligent, Chinese femininity is produced as the ruthlessly repressed bearer of oriental culture (Archer & Francis, 2005). Hence the apparent silence, submissiveness and diligence of British-Chinese girls is constructed by their teachers as reflecting their lack of assertion and confidence as a result of their ‘oppression’. In fact, many of our female pupil respondents presented themselves as behaving very differently to this model (maintaining for example that they were ‘loudbound’ in class, ‘can’t stop talking’, did not take learning seriously, and so on). And indeed when pressed about particular girls teachers did sometimes concede that there are ‘exceptions’ to their construction of British-Chinese girls’ classroom behaviour. However, it is also interesting to reflect that the sorts of behaviours which teachers are reading as evidence of British-Chinese timorousness is actually constructed/produced by British-Chinese girls in a deliberate positioning of themselves as ‘good pupils’, which actually builds their educational self-esteem. For example, Chui (F, Albert Sq) reflects in relation to her classroom behaviour, “school work, I do my homework. I’ve never actually been in school detention before and that’s since Year Seven up til now [...] And yeah, I think I’ve been a very good example to the school I think, yeah.”

Approach to learning

When invited to talk about their approaches to learning, many of our respondents presented an approach in keeping with the stereotype of Chinese pupils as highly applied, conscientious and diligent. For example, Kate (Albert Square) observes, “I don’t talk to people that much and I concentrate on lessons.” George (Anthony Truman) explains, “I try and complete everything within a certain time, by the deadline and I try and do it well so basically I try my best”. Helen (Beale High) agrees, “I think when say work is really difficult, I still kind of put a lot of effort into it. And I believe that if you put a lot of effort into it you like get rewards at the end. So I just, even if it’s difficult I still kind of pay attention.”

But other pupils were far less conscientious, and more representative of attitudes we see as typical of (white-British) teenagers in relation to schoolwork. Grace (Beale High) describes her approach to her school work as; “Talks too much, got a big mouth. Rude all the time and call out in lessons all the time, which is stupid.” Hong (M, Albert Sq) says that he is “lazy”, elaborating, “I do try but when you’re lying down in your bed you’re not really too bothered to get up but I do try to get up and do my work.” Phil (Albert Sq) equivocates that his approach “Depends on the mood really. It’s like
if I'm annoyed I won't do any work. Like if I'm in a chirpy mood I'll be doing the work”. Others agreed that their approach depended on their mood and whether or not they could “be arsed” (as Donna, Slater School for Girls, puts it), or whether the lesson concerned is ‘boring’. Many pupils shared Judith’s (Albert Sq) approach of “usually I leave everything till last minute” (although some also specified that they always succeed in completing work, even if in a rushed form, or with little effort put in). So generally we found plenty of evidence to confound dominant stereotypes of British-Chinese pupils as silenced and/or ‘abnormal’ - although such constructions also give us pause to reflect on the (Western) values and assumptions underlying dominant constructions of ‘normal adolescence’.

Reflections on British-Chinese and Western constructions of education

Taken together, these findings present a picture of British-Chinese pupils as tending to differ from pupils from other ethnic groups in terms of their subject preferences, and in their constructions of themselves as pupils. This emerging picture might be read as stereotypically presenting the British-Chinese as ‘odd’ and ‘other’ (different, and pathological in their disregard for ‘British’ constructions of ‘normal’ masculinity and femininity in the school environment).

One of our intentions in conceiving the project was to examine factors which might be contributing to the high achievement of the British-Chinese as a group within the British education system. We do not seek to shy away from or ‘hide’ difference in an effort to homogenise ethnic groups. However, we are keen to avoid the reification of such expressions of difference as essential to (fixed) ‘cultures’: our data demonstrates extensive diversity in responses and attitudes to educational issues among the British-Chinese pupils, and we hope to have illustrated such differences during this paper. Gender, class, locality, place of family origin and so on all impact here as well as do individual differences among respondents.

We maintain that British-Chinese pupils tend to draw on specific discourses in order to construct their distinct ethnic identity in relation to other cultures (examples of such practices can be found in Francis & Archer, 2005a; Francis & Archer, 2005b). Hence particular discourses around education are mobilised to construct and delineate a specifically British-Chinese identity and production of ‘Chineseness’ (see Song, 1997). Homi Bhabha (2001) reflects on such diaspoic positions, In-between spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood - that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. It is in the emergence of the interstices - the overlap and displacement of domains of difference - that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest or cultural value are negotiated (pp136-137).

In the case of British-Chinese pupils and parents, we the found the discourse of ‘Chinese value of education’ to be a primary tool in this fashioning of ‘nationness’. Within this outlook on education, there are clearly other narratives and practices which need to be teased out (such as ‘Chinese ability at maths’ and the practices associated with this discourse). However, it does appear to be the case that the British-Chinese belief in education as an expression of their ‘Chineseness’ and also as a method for ‘bettering oneself’, positions British-Chinese pupils of all social classes (and is
utilised by the pupils to position themselves) as educationally committed (Francis and Archer, 2005a). It may not be surprising, then, that the practices resulting from this discourse result in behaviours and constructions which are relatively particular to British-Chinese pupils. For example, their listing fewer curriculum subjects that they dislike in comparison to other pupils, their generally ‘good’ and applied behaviour in the eyes of teachers and themselves, and their positioning of themselves as ‘good’ pupils. These practices, and the general valuing of education as a provider of intrinsic and extrinsic benefits, clearly provides discursive and behavioural foundations for their (generally) high educational achievement.

What is of more concern from a social justice perspective is the way in which these ‘good’ behaviours and high achievement remain problematised and sometimes pathologised by educationalists. As we noted above, we found that many teachers saw British-Chinese pupils as ‘too good’ to be ‘ideal’ pupils. A Western (middle-class, masculine) model expects pupils to be questioning, and for pupils to achieve through natural talent: achievement through diligence and obedience is disparaged as ‘plodding’ (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Stanworth, 1981; Clarricoates, 1987). It is this model which has traditionally pathologised the learning approaches of girls in relation to boys, their apparent conformity and diligence perceived as lack by educationalists, irrespective of achievement (Clarricoates, 1987; Walkerdine, 1988; Skelton & Francis, 2003). In the case of British-Chinese pupils, the (stereotyped) classroom behaviours of both girls and boys are constructed as feminine (diligent, quiet, deferent, conformist), and hence as ‘not quite right’ (Archer & Francis, 2005). Indeed, one or two pupil respondents actually seemed aware of these perceptions and a consequent dissonance between their own view of being an ideal pupil and that of their teachers/non-Chinese peers. Helen (Beale High) claimed to be a ‘good pupil’. When asked whether there were any respects in which she is not, she replied,

I’m generally quite good but I think I need to be more confident in speaking in class. Ask more questions and kind of contribute more to the class sometimes. Because I like, because I mainly like work individually, I like working by myself. So I need to improve on that.

Certainly she identifies some of the concerns expressed by Sham and Woodrow (1998) who brand British-Chinese pupils ‘passive’, ‘deferent’ and ‘conformist’ (Sham & Woodrow, 1998; Woodrow & Sham, 2001). In their opinion British-Chinese pupils “find it hard to form an independent opinion since opinions are slavishly formed in a Chinese household from family authority figures” (Woodrow & Sham, 2001). (Some of our data directly contradicts this view, as many of the pupils critically analysed and questioned the views of their parents during the interviews, and indeed some of the parents mentioned such behaviour in their children during their interviews). These attitudes are problematised by the researchers as developing attitudes which provide “little impetus for growth and change” (Sham & Woodrow, 1998; Woodrow & Sham, 2001). We do agree with these researchers, however, that there is a Western model of learning and education which often goes unanalysed and unarticulated. Clearly British-Chinese pupils are positioned in relation to this European model, and may be found wanting in spite of their achievement because, to use the phrase used by Walkerdine in relation to girls’ approaches to maths, they are not seen to be learning ‘in the right way’ (Walkerdine, 1988).

Conclusions
British-Chinese pupils have been shown to differ somewhat from pupils from other ethnic groups in their choices of favourite and least favourite subject, and in their perception of themselves as pupils. British-Chinese pupils were more likely to rate maths and science as favourites than were other groups of pupils, and less likely to rate maths as a least favourite. British-Chinese girls’ choices of favourites were less gender-stereotypical than in the case of girls from other groups. British-Chinese boys were less likely to list P.E as a favourite, and British-Chinese girls were less likely to note drama as a favourite, than their contemporaries from other ethnic groups. Far more British-Chinese pupils rated themselves ‘good pupils’ than did pupils from other ethnic groups, and working class and middle class pupils were equally likely to represent themselves in this way. Hence this finding lends further support to our general findings that British-Chinese pupils constructed themselves as valuing education highly, and often derive self-esteem from this in relation to their learning and classroom conduct.

We have reflected on some of the implications of these findings, showing how despite being viewed as positive by British-Chinese pupils themselves, these attitudes are not always read completely positively by British educationalists, who sometimes position these behaviours as pathological. This is because the views of learning constructed by many British-Chinese pupils do not completely ‘fit’ the Western (Masculine and middle-class) models of the ‘ideal pupil’ and/or ‘correct’ approaches to learning. We suggest that work need to be done to interrogate the ‘unsaid’ of the British educational model, and to examine these in relation to diverse approaches, in order to ensure that minority ethnic pupils (and white girls) are not unduly problematised.

References
Archer L (2003) Race, Masculinity and Schooling: Muslim boys and education (Buckingham, Open University Press).


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1 Research has shown that the Chinese in Britain face both discrimination from the general public and from institutions, and problems accessing public and social services (Chau & Yu, 2001; Cheng & Heath, 1993).

2 The vast majority of those owning or managing a business ran their own Chinese restaurant or take-away, pointing to the complexities of applying traditional social class categorisations to the British-Chinese in the UK. As we have pointed out elsewhere (Francis & Archer, 2004; Archer & Francis, forthcoming), many of these parents, despite owning their own businesses, do not ‘fit’ traditional middle-class trajectories in that they often originate from impoverished backgrounds, and many have had little access to formal education. As such, the ability of arguably ‘Eurocentric’ models of social class and social capital to effectively describe these trajectories is limited.

3 This sample involved 100 14-16 year old pupils drawn from three London comprehensive schools, of whom 33 were British-white, 32 were British Caribbean, and 35 represented diverse other ethnic origins, including a handful of British-Chinese. 50 pupils were female, and 50 male.

4 Maths was often noted by pupil and parent respondents as something which Chinese people are good at, or are stereotypically seen to be good at. Some pupils discussed how parents take maths, and achievement at maths, particularly seriously. Also, teachers as well as pupils frequently observed that Chinese first-generation immigrant pupils who have been schooled in China tend to be particularly advanced at maths, and ahead of British peers.

5 Unfortunately though, the notion of a ‘good pupil’ is not the same as that of the Western ‘ideal pupil’ (Francis & Archer, forthcoming). Where British-Chinese pupils were overwhelmingly positioned by teachers as ‘good pupils’, they were constructed as insufficiently questioning/assertive to fit Westernised, gendered discursive constructions of the ‘ideal pupil’ (Archer & Francis, 2005).
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Table 2: Comparison between favourite subjects of British-Chinese pupils, and of mixed-ethnicity sample

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*all science subjects included

Table 3: British-Chinese pupils’ least favourite subjects
### Table 4: Comparison between least favourite subjects of British-Chinese pupils, and of mixed-ethnicity sample

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*all science subjects included*