British Education for White People: Educational Assimilation, Social Production, Genders, and Research Basis

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More and more UK-based researches begin to focus on the British White population, as they are the main ethnic group in UK society that leads and influences the development of UK education and society. According to the UK government figures in 2018, statistics show that “the employment rate of British White stood at 75%, with the overall employment rate in the UK stood at 74%” (UK Government, 2018). At the GCSE level in 2018, it is demonstrated that “there are more than 63% of British White pupils who achieved A* to C levels in English and Mathematics exams” (UK Government, 2018), higher than the excellence rate of Mixed (30%), Black Caribbean (51%), and Pakistani (58%). It is obvious that British White people are highly prioritized in UK society, especially in educational fields due to the unequal distribution of educational resources between British Whites and other ethnic groups in UK society. However, there are also some of the inequalities that exist among British Whites, as their differences gender, regions, and socio-economic status. This paper aims to have an exploration on the British White education in a further step in terms of how the inequalities exist in their education, primarily from the lens of international education as assimilation, social reproduction, and gender issues.

Keywords: British education, educational assimilation, social production, genders

British White’s Education as Assimilation: Changing of Attitudes, Educational Diversity, and British Immigration

With the rapid increase of immigrants in the UK, more and more British education researches have begun to study whether assimilationist education needs to be changed. It has been found that White British are increasingly disturbed by this type of diversity. Researchers argued that the concept of assimilation should avoid falling into a certain form and propose a “new assimilation theory” (Antonsich, 2012). From the perspective of the specifics of the assimilation demands, the development of the theory of British assimilation education and the “new assimilation theory”, this essay will focus on the changes in White British’s attitudes towards immigrant assimilation education.

Generally, assimilation includes acquiring the language, attitude, lifestyle, behavior, values, and even religion of White British people (Kivisto, 2005). And it is related to the expected behavior of immigrants. Behavior is a very intuitive type of performance, such as general behavior, dress, diet, life, leisure activities, and even thoughts, which is often part of the reason why White British people discriminate against or exclude immigrants. It is through performance that assimilation becomes something visible in daily life, building the image of immigrants in the hearts of White British (Bell, 1999). For example, in Antonsich’s (2012) interview,
a White British interviewee said, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do”, which is also the common attitude of many interviewees. Another White British male shared that he was a tutor in an Iranian family, but this family made him feel that they were British, as the mother made coffee for him, even though they were Muslims.

Furthermore, it was generally expected that immigrants must integrate into the new culture and abandon their own traditions and social habits (Vasta, 2007). There are many immigrants flowing into the UK from other parts of Europe. They have moved to rural areas near London, England, which have not previously dealt with immigrants (Mary, 2014). The local British Whites have no history of accepting immigration. They are very concerned about assimilation, but the progress has been slow. Over time, people’s dissatisfaction with this kind of education has gradually increased, because they believe that only focusing on assimilation education in language is not enough. In the late 1960s, a new theory of pluralism emerged, aiming at explaining the persistence of racial differences and the new requirements for recognition by marginalized social groups (such as blacks, women, and homosexuals), indigenous peoples, and regionalist movements (Brubaker, 2001). After the education of this concept has been admired for a period in the UK, it has gradually received many voices of opposition.

Finally, some scholars put forward a “new assimilation theory” to solve some of the problems that British Whites are disturbed by the diversity around them. Fear and anxiety about ethnic cultural and religious diversity created a new demand for assimilation, which reversed the trend of diversity and multiculturalism in the 1970s and 1980s (Brubaker, 2001). Antonsich (2012) argued that the shift from multiculturalism to assimilation is a universal trend. Using the ESS and CID surveys, Citrin and Sides (2008) found that British hostility towards immigration, support for stricter immigration policies, and desire for cultural unity and homogeneity are all growing. In addition, he found that the United States is more tolerant of cultural diversity, but also found that British, like the American, tend to overestimate the number of immigrants in their country and tend to support lower levels of immigrants. This shows that accepting higher levels of immigrants requires more selective immigration policies and emphasizes the coexistence of assimilation and diversification of new immigrants. The new assimilation theory believes that assimilation is still a powerful analytical tool to understand the process of immigrants integrating into contemporary society. In addition, the new theory treats immigrants as active agents in the process of “becoming similar” (Brubaker, 2001). Similarly, the new assimilation theory does not necessarily foresee that the original culture of immigrants will be erased, because the sameness (assimilation) and difference (multiculturalism) can coexist instead of being two dichotomous dimensions. I believe that assimilationist scholars have clearly outlined the socioeconomic dimensions (such as income, education, housing, etc.), in which the convergence between immigrants and the majority ethnic group is used to assess the degree of assimilation; instead, is known on the meanings that assimilation assumes among ethnic majority people. I believe this kind of research is essential to further improve our understanding of the assimilation process because it complements the perspective based on migrants’ perspectives.

Secondary Education and Social Reproduction: Academic Achievement, Social Status, and Practices

It has been found that working-class students always have problematic relationships with academic success (Ingram, 2009), or in other words, students from working class are less likely to have outstanding academic performance comparing with middle class students, and researchers argue that it is the misrecognition of family education (as a capital) (Walkerdine et al., 2001). No matter how prioritized British White education
is in the UK society, class inequality exists in this credential society that leads to the unfair distribution of educational resources. In this section, research will be introduced in terms of how different categories of middle schools in the UK educate students differently and “assimilate their student to be different” (Ingram, 2009) after graduation in their academic outcomes, behaviors, and social mobility.

The topic of the research discussed here is titled “Working-class boys, educational success and the misrecognition of working-class culture”, which was done by Nicola Ingram in 2009. In this research, he observed students from a grammar school and a secondary school from Belfast—a city that is in the northern part of the UK. Based on this research, this section will highlight how deterministic “capital” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 725) is by comparing middle-class students from a grammar school with working-class students from a secondary school, particularly from the lens of institutional habitus, academic results, and cultural capital.

Initially, entry requirements of the grammar school are way higher than secondary school, since grammar schools in the UK aim to “cultivate elites” and students who enter grammar schools must take the “11 plus” test beforehand to show their learning abilities in primary schools, and this test is far more complicated than the normal exams for primary schools’ students in the UK. Different entry requirements select different groups of students, which causes the difference of academic outcomes after graduation. According to Ingram (2009), grammar school requires students to achieve A in all the courses before entering, whereas in secondary school “less than 35% of students got grades better than C” (Ingram, 2009). Grammar school staffs care about their academic reputations as they claim on their school web that they have “a long tradition of superb academic achievement”; the principal also expresses a strong desire of making their school “remain academic” (Reay & Vincent, 2014), which includes making their students exceed in GCSEs and A-Levels. But for students from secondary school, due to the low entry requirements, students are less likely to “move upward” (Ingram, 2009) after graduation—not only because of their academic abilities, but also because of their educational environment. For instance, students in this secondary school are predominantly made up of “students in Linvale” (2009)—a small town near Belfast, and with a certain proportion of students (less than 10%) (Reay & Vincent, 2014) from similarly disadvantaged localities. Not like grammar school, secondary school does not always put students’ academic achievement in the first place, and parents have lower academic expectation for their children as well. In this case, the research shows that: Less than 40% of the students in secondary school get qualifications of higher education whereas more than 87.6% of the students in grammar school achieve A or A* in A-Levels and go to higher educational institutions after graduation (Ingram, 2009).

Furthermore, grammar school and secondary school use different teaching strategies; here it refers to “institutional habitus” (Bourdieu, 2002). To begin with, “institutional habitus” (Ingram, 2009) is known as schools’ modes of thought, behaviors, and opinions. According to Ingram (2009), it is “a system of dispositions that are long lasting but not permanent” (p.421). The research demonstrates that students’ behavior in grammar school is perceived to be generally good. For example, from the experience of a newly employed teacher in this school, she describes that “students always line up to the class” and “school does not involve overly aggressive behavior” (Ingram, 2009, p.425). She especially mentions that: “I walked pass a boy who flicked something at me which was noticed by an old teacher, then the next day I received a two-page detailed apologize from this boy for not being nice” (2009, p.425). Overall, grammar school really adheres their traditional value, in which students are shaped to these dispositions and there is no room for alternatives. By contrast, secondary school with bad reputations among communities has a quite different habitus—with failing the entry exams and being from the families with lower social status, “students have already been under a low self-esteem” (Ingram, 2009,
p.427). Also, students have had known everyone else in their classes as they are from the same community, this makes the school to be seen as an “easy ride place” (Ingram, 2009). Ray, a Grade 8 student says, “I do not like it here, but other schools are worse as they are stricter”. Different school habitus will shape students differently, especially their behaviors. Students’ behavior is deterministic for their cultivation of competencies, which is significant for future pathways—students with better core competencies are more competitive for being needed in society whereas students who do not receive systematical competency cultivation in schools may spend more time being capable in society after graduation. Different schools play a crucial role in determining whether students are being favored of society; it is parents’ social status that determines which school their kids to go.

Finally, cultural capital would also be an indispensable factor that creates the social reproduction of inequalities, and here cultural capital is primarily referred to as the “institutionalized cultural capital”—it can be explained as the “academic credentials and professional qualifications” (Bourdieu, 1985) of their parents. As it is pointed out from the research that under the school’s administration and teachers’ requirements of learning and exams, students from secondary school are more inclined to disobey the basic rule set by school. As Jonny, a Year 12 student from secondary school says: “Everything is under control, and we do not have freedom” (Ingram, 2009, p.432). Clearly, students in secondary school always complain about the irrelevance of learning. Tom, another Year 12 student even says, “I hate it, I learn nothing” (Ingram, 2009, p.432). However, the fact is that there are only students from secondary school who complain (Ingram, 2009), almost all the students from grammar school are willing to push themselves to learn and achieve since they are aspired by middle-class careers such as doctor, lawyer, and professor (Ingram, 2009)—those are what their middle-class families do. Thus, they regard their learning at school as important element to help them achieve higher career goal in the future. Parents’ professionalism would be a vital inspiration for their children when choosing what kind of life they would like to live and what goals they would like to achieve. In this case, students from middle-class family would have stronger sense that learning is necessary to help them build a brighter pathway and be stable in the stratified society.

From this research, the “maintenance of class inequality” (Ingram, 2009) should be pointed out, as one group rejects its class of origin in favor of upward mobility while the other secures its working-class status.

**British White Female Students: Higher Education, Gender Inequality, and a Comparison Between UK and China**

Just like what has been mentioned in this paper previously, there are many issues about the development of British higher education, among which gender inequality is also prominent (Bruley, 1999). However, White British female students are a turning point in gender inequality in British higher education (Bruley, 1999). This section will mainly discuss the issues about the White British female students in British higher education from a gender perspective, as well as the policies and measures adopted by the British government to solve these issues. The purpose is to provide some reference for China’s education reform.

The concept of gender refers to the group characteristics and behaviors of men or women shown by people in a specific cultural environment, as well as the construction of the relationship system and power mechanism of these group characteristics and behaviors (Riddell, 2007). That is, “the variable social identity and expectations constructed in a social way” (Riddell, 2007, p.122). This means that in different social environments, gender will also show different characteristics in different environments. For example, there used to be only the image of superman and housewife, but with the development of society, the image of
superwoman and househusband appeared. This is a comprehensive manifestation of the expectations, requirements, evaluations, and behaviors of the relationship between men and women formed in society (Riddell, 2007). With the development of sense of equality, gender has gradually been regarded as a new perspective, becoming an analysis mode alongside race and class.

According to statistics from the British Higher Education Statistics Agency, in the 1960s, with the influence of the concept of gender equality education, some newly established universities in the UK began to provide some policies to attract women to enroll, increasing the proportion of women in universities. But men are still the majority; however, from 1996 to 1997, the proportion of women in higher education in the UK exceeded that of men for the first time (Zhang, 2012). Then, from 2004 to 2008, the number and proportion of girls applying for colleges and universities and being admitted increased year by year, and girls accounted for 54.9% of full-time students, while girls accounted for 65.3% of part-time students, whereas this did not reflect the dominant position of women in higher education (Zhang, 2012). In fact, the reason for the increase proportion of girls in universities is because of the increased number of middle-class White women participating in higher education, but among them, working-class women, and minority women, especially so for black women, are difficult for these female groups to participate in colleges and universities (Zhang, 2012). This showed that such changes have increased the inclusiveness and diversity of higher education in the UK and promoted the development of education, but there was still obvious gender inequality in women’s participation in higher education.

In the UK, the enrollment rate of girls in higher education is higher than that of boys, but there are obvious gaps in different educational institutions, social class, and race (Tight, 2010). In 2007, the enrollment rate of men in higher education in the UK was 44.2% and that of women was 55.8% (Tight, 2010). Among them, the enrollment rate of women in the working class was only 4.36%, and most of the women came from the White middle class (Tight, 2010). There are also gender differences in admission opportunities in different universities; for example, the proportion of women in the top 10 universities is 50.62%, while the proportion in the bottom 10 universities is 62.52%, which is 12.52% points higher than that of men. Moreover, the higher the university ranking, the higher the proportion of women is from White rich families (Tight, 2010). It can be found that there was still obvious gender inequality in women’s participation in higher education, reflecting the gender consciousness of the patriarchal social structure.

To eliminate gender inequality in higher education and other aspects of society, the British government and British society have adopted a series of positive strategies and steps (Riddell, 2007). For example, the United Kingdom established the Equality and Human Rights Commission in accordance with the Equality Act 2006 in October 2007. The Equality and Human Rights Commission not only deals with gender discrimination issues, but also handles various discrimination issues such as race, religion, and class (Riddell, 2007). It set five goals for eliminating gender discrimination in education and employment. They are reducing the income gap between men and women; more funding for education; improving public services; equal access to justice and security; let women have the same rights as men.

In summary, China faces the same issues as the UK. In recent years, in China’s higher education process and educational results, women are still in a disadvantaged position. According to Hannum, Ishida, Park, and Tam (2019), in China,

Compared to earlier studies showing a secular decline in the effects of parents’ education and occupation (e.g., Deng & Treiman 1997), recent studies show a rise in the inequality of college attendance by socioeconomic background (Jiang &
Tam 2015a, Yeung 2013). However, rural origin (i.e., rural bokou status) continues to be a source of educational disadvantage (Golley & Kong 2018, Wu 2010, Yeung 2013). (p.18)

So, I think the Chinese government should learn from the British government and actively introduce policies to protect gender equality to ensure equality in education, and I have found many studies now only focus on equality in enrollment between men and women. In fact, by analyzing the situation in the UK, I found employment equality, that is, the equality of education results between men and women, namely, the issue of equality of income, is also very important.

**Conclusion**

This essay explored the British White education in terms of how the inequalities exist in their education, primarily from the lens of international education as assimilation, social reproduction, and gender issues. In the first place, it illustrates the overview of background and rationale. The next part followed is British White’s education as assimilation, namely, changing of attitudes, educational diversity, and British immigration. Then it mainly outlines the secondary education and social reproduction about academic achievement, social status, and practices. Next, it goes to illustrate and analyze the White British female students in British higher education from the perspective of gender equality, comparing between UK and China. Finally, it comes to the conclusion about what key findings for the international education are as assimilation, social reproduction, and gender issues. Cultural capital would be indispensable factors that create the social reproduction of inequalities, and it caused “maintenance of class inequality” (Ingram, 2009). Such consequence affects the inequality of college attendance by socioeconomic background especially between male and female. Moreover, because of inequality in education, the majority ethnic group (British Whites) needs and attitudes towards assimilation education are constantly changing with the number of international students.

**References**


