

Eastern European Migrants' Experiences of Racism in English Schools: Positions of Marginal Whiteness and Linguistic Otherness

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The number of students in England registered as speaking the languages of Eastern and Central Europe has grown significantly in the past decade, but these migrants' educational experiences remain under-researched. This study, based on interviews with students, parents and teachers in four secondary schools in London and in the East of England, found that Eastern European students experience various forms of racism and low expectations from teachers. Using a framework influenced by Critical Race Theory and critical conceptions of whiteness, we argue that these students occupy a position of *marginal* whiteness, related to their linguistic Otherness. However, as the parents we interviewed were aware, the students do benefit from whiteness if they speak English without an accent, so that they are not perceived as 'foreign'.

Keywords: racism, whiteness, Eastern European, EAL, migrant students

Introduction

Students registered as speaking languages of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) as their mother tongue have become the fastest growing EAL (English as an Additional Language) group in schools in England. Since 2008, Romanian, Latvian, Hungarian, Bulgarian, Slovak, Lithuanian, Czech, Russian and Polish have been among the ten fastest growing languages in primary and secondary schools¹. This rapid growth is linked to the expansion of the European Union (EU): according to the 2011 Census, 1.1 million of A8 migrants – citizens of the countries that joined the EU in May 2004 (Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia) and A2 migrants – citizens of the two countries that joined the EU in January 2007 (Bulgaria and Romania), resided in the UK. More recent migration statistics continued to register a significant share of EU nationals in total numbers of migrants in the UK, with half of all EU migrants coming from the accession countries (Vargas-Silva and Markaki 2017).

EU nationals have been a key group in the UK immigration political debate for over a decade, as the UK government could not restrict their entry under EU law. The anti-immigration

stance in official policy and tabloid media contributed to making ‘new’ EU migrants look undesirable and as a drain on public resources (Fox, Morosanu, and Szilassy 2012; Burnett 2016), despite evidence to the contrary (Dustmann and Frattini 2014). Furthermore, EU migration became a defining issue in the UK referendum on leaving the EU in June 2016. The British vote to leave the EU led to a spike in incidents of race hatred towards Eastern European migrants across the country, manifested in the fatal attack on a Polish man in Harlow and countless other, often unreported, incidents of racial violence (Burnett 2016), including incidents in schools (Hepburn 2017).

Despite the prominence of this group in media debates, the experiences of Eastern European migrant students in schools remain under-researched. English schools, like other public services, have been described in the media (such as reports in the *Sun*, *Daily Mail* and *Daily Telegraph*) as ‘changed’, ‘stretched’ and ‘overwhelmed’ by the influx of migrants who do not speak English as their first language. Headlines in the top-selling national newspapers, such as ‘English is no longer the first language for the majority of pupils at one in nine schools’ (*Daily Telegraph*, January 31, 2014) or ‘School need money to cope with influx of thousands of immigrant children, say teachers’ (*Daily Mail*, March 20, 2008) contribute to the negative public perception. Furthermore, the press speculate that large numbers of migrant students could be detrimental to the attainment of native English speakers, even though there is no evidence that EAL children lower standards in British schools (Strand, Malmberg, and Hall 2015; Geay, McNally, and Telhaj 2012).

A recent nuanced statistical analysis however does associate EAL status with a particularly large attainment gap within the ‘White Other’ ethnic group – which includes those who have migrated from CEE countries (Strand, Malmberg, and Hall 2015). In particular, Slovak, Lithuanian, Romanian and Latvian speakers were found to perform significantly less well at age 16 than ‘White Other’ native English speakers, with mobility identified as the main

risk factor (over 40% of these students arrived to the UK between age 5-14 compared to the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England sample average of 3%) (see also Tereshchenko and Archer 2014).

Research suggests that the recent migration history puts the majority of Eastern European migrants at a significant disadvantage. In economic terms, they get the lowest return on their educational qualifications compared to British-born workers and almost all other (including other European) migrant groups (Vargas-Silva 2016; Johnston, Khattab, and Manley 2015). The interpersonal experiences of these migrants in the UK suggest that a shared skin colour do not exempt Eastern European migrant from racism and discrimination (Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy 2015; Samaluk 2014; McDowell 2009). For example, these migrants do not have the cultural knowledge or cultural capital to perform ‘whiteness’ in the way white British people do, which renders them as not ‘quite white’ enough culturally to be accepted (Moore 2013). Finally, Eastern European parents’ lack of English and knowledge about the British education system, together with a lack of social capital, could become potential obstacles to the educational and labour market success of the children (Moskal 2016; Lopez Rodriguez 2010; Valkanova 2009; Sales et al. 2008).

In this context, this paper sets out the findings from a study with Eastern European students and parents, as well as teachers, in four secondary schools in London and in the East of England. We present key findings related to racism in educational settings in four areas, relating to: young people’s experiences of racisms in relation to wider racialisation of these migrants; the impact of being an EAL student; the experiences of Eastern European Roma students; and parents’ adaptive strategies. First, we outline the conceptual framework and methods used.

Conceptual framework

In this paper we use a conceptualisation of ‘race’ as a social construct, influenced by Critical Race Theory and critical whiteness studies. Here ‘race’ has no biological significance beyond phenotypical differences in appearance, but has social significance in that how individuals are racialised – seen to be of a ‘race’ – affects how they are treated, within a context of a society within which racism in multiple forms is embedded (Omi and Winant 2004; Taylor, Gillborn, and Ladson-Billings 2009). In line with CRT methodology, here we prioritise the voices and experiences of the marginalised group, and their perceptions of incidences of racism (Ladson-Billings 2004; Solorzano and Yosso 2002).

Of particular importance here are critical theoretical perspectives relevant to the positioning of Eastern Europeans within a society where the majority of the population are also White, notably scholarship on marginal whiteness and Othering through language. Conceptualisations of positions of peripheral or temporary whiteness, whereby people are seen as occupying states of whiteness only at particular times, or in particular contexts, are useful in thinking about how White Europeans are positioned in England. Wider research in this field, for example on the Irish and Jewish communities in the United States, has examined how previously marginal groups may be allowed into whiteness, where it benefits the majority (Ignatiev 1995; Sacks 1994). However, this work suggests this allowance is precarious and can be rescinded. Similarly, the idea that some groups occupy a precarious position in relation to whiteness has also been used in the UK to consider how Gypsy and Traveller children are perceived in schools as not occupying positions of acceptable whiteness (Bhopal 2011). Whiteness – and the performance of whiteness as an intelligible racial identity – is a series of norms, in terms of behaviour, language and attitudes, dependent on a particular social context. Variance from these norms comes with risks that the subject is rendered unintelligible as ‘white’, or to use Allen’s phrase, ‘white but not quite’ (2009). In later sections we argue that in

England, where the majority of the population are racialised as white, Eastern Europeans are positioned as at the margins of whiteness, due to their nationality and significantly, their language.

This peripheral positioning has intersectional dimensions relating to class: in education in England, positive models of whiteness are inflected with class assumptions related to accent, language use and occupation through the idealisation of the ‘white middle class’ student (Bradbury 2013). Indeed, the education debate on inequality is dominated by discussions of the failing ‘white working class’ student, in reference to students on Free School Meals (FSM); this ‘white working class’ student is constructed in opposition to the idealised white middle-class student. Thus, although there are positive models of the white working class in operation more widely beyond education, the association of Eastern European migrants with manual occupations and thus working-class identities further positions them on the margins of idealised whiteness. This marginality has an increased impact on boys, we argue, who are generally lower-achieving within the education system in England (DfE 2017) and the continued subject of concern, and for whom the negative associations of working-classness with violence, criminality and heavy drinking are more damaging.

Furthermore, Eastern European students’ status as English as an additional language (EAL) learners distances them from the idealised white monolingual middle-class student. Labelling students as ‘EAL’ is form of Othering, a position of exclusion on the ‘native-speaker-versus-other’ binary (Leung, Harris, and Rampton 1997). However, postcolonial critiques of how the ‘permanent Other’ is created through linguistic difference (Bhabha 1994) are not appropriate here, as the power relations between the White British majority and Eastern European minority are not based on a history of empire and oppressive subjugation. Put simply, the ancestors of white students did not rule over the ancestors of Eastern European students. Moreover, Eastern Europeans retain some of the privileges of whiteness, however precariously.

But, we argue there is still an imbalance of power and a distinct form of Othering present, based on speaking another language, a history of migration, and the simply numerical minority status of Eastern Europeans.

EAL status positions Eastern European students as a ‘problem group’, through well-meaning concern for their progress. Linguistic otherness can be the basis for differential treatment, as we see in our data, even though different treatment based on ‘race’ or nationality is unacceptable. As Mitchell argues in reference to the US context:

...where biological race can no longer be an explicit, legal tool for discrimination, culture and language have become powerful factors in institutionalized discrimination and racist outcomes, especially for multilingual learners and their teachers (Mitchell 2013, 340).

Mitchell argues that the subordinate status of languages other than English and those who speak these languages relates to the ‘majoritarian stories’ in education, that is, stories ‘constructed so that the responsibility for their own submission falls on the subordinated people’ (Love 2004, 228-9 cited in Mitchell 2013). Of relevance here are two of these stories: ‘difference is deficit’ and ‘English-is-*all*-that-matters’. Inherent within both of these stories is the idea that other languages are something to be ‘given up’ in return for assimilation, and as something which limits or holds back migrant students, or as a sign of ‘backwardness’. While much of the scholarship within CRT on language is based on the US context, in this work we take into account the specificity of the context of the dominance of English *in England*. It is perhaps the case that the power relations inherent within the binary of English-versus-all-other-languages are obscured by the fact that speaking English in England is not associated with colonisation; it appears natural and neutral. But nonetheless, we argue that the discourses around learning English, as in the US, work to delegitimise other languages and cultures as lacking (Yosso 2005). We explore this in more detail in later sections.

Methods

Data were collected in two schools in London and two in the East of England. The choice of geographical localities was informed by the official statistics that suggests that London is the place of residence of the majority of the migrant population from the EU accession countries – Poland and Romania are in the top five countries of birth of migrants in London (Rienzo and Vargas-Silva 2017). The East of England has the highest after London proportion of migrants born in East European countries that joined the EU in 2004 (McCollum and Findlay 2011).

Students of Eastern European migrant origins represented a notable size group in each of the secondary school in the study. The two urban schools in the East of England had above the national average proportions of students from a range of ethnic minority backgrounds, while the intake of both London schools was principally from minority ethnic backgrounds. Although not identical in size, all four had higher than average proportion of EAL students and those receiving free school meals. Accordingly, bilingual support staff were employed to contribute to teaching and learning within the schools. There was also a language support coordinator. These schools were described in their than most recent Ofsted² inspection reports as ‘good’.

Fieldwork in schools was conducted by a female researcher with Ukrainian ethnic background using English as an interview medium with teachers and, overwhelmingly, with students³. This work included 22 semi-structured interviews with teachers (15 women, 7 men). In each of the schools, we interviewed teachers with responsibility for ethnic minority achievement and EAL and subject teachers (or teaching assistants) with experience of working with Eastern European students. Five of the EAL staff interviewed in London schools were originally from the EU accession countries.

A total of 71 students (36 boys and 35 girls) took part in research. Their ages ranged from 12 to 18, with the average age of 15 years. In addition to providing their own consent prior to interviews, those students who were under 16 were required to return a consent form signed

by a parent/carer. To facilitate recruitment, the parental information sheet and consent form were available in Polish, Russian, Romanian, Czech, Slovak, Bulgarian, Latvian and Lithuanian. All of the participants were first generation migrants from different EU accession countries, although the sample included two students from Ukraine – a non-EU member state. The location of participants and their origin (see Table 1) to some extent reflect the geographical distribution of particular migrant communities as well as the selection of participants by teachers. Thus, although generalisations cannot be made to the whole population of ‘new’ EU migrant students, the data serve as a useful indication of potential patterns and relationships. Finally, and significantly for understanding the racialisation in relation to social status, the overwhelming majority of the students in the final sample came from ‘working class’ families, in which parents did not have higher education and were doing what could roughly be classified as manual work. However, parental education and work status were not considered as an eligibility criteria to take part in this study.

Table 1. Student sample by nationality, location and gender

Nationality	London	East of England
Polish	21	12
Lithuanian	11	8
Romanian	7	0
Latvian	0	5
Slovak	0	4*
Ukrainian	2	0
Bulgarian	1	0
Total	42	29
Male	19	17
Female	23	12

* This includes 3 participants from the Roma community.

Individual interviews lasting up to 30 minutes were conducted with 38 of the students.

The interviews focused on individual experiences of schooling, aspirations and perceived barriers to achieving them. 14 same-sex and mainly same-ethnicity group discussions⁴ (with 3-6 participants each) lasting up to 45 minutes were conducted with a total of 57 students, some of which did and others did not take part in individual interviews. The group discussions focused more overtly than interviews on themes of racialisation. To probe into how students thought Eastern European migrants were perceived, we asked each participant to write on a post-it note at the beginning of the group discussion what, in their view, British people thought about Eastern European migrants; this activity to a significant degree informed further discussion. We expected that the interaction among students with comparable experiences in terms of gender and ethnicity would exemplify the views and beliefs representative of certain sub-groups. We also hoped that interviewing students with similar peers would create a 'safe' space to articulate their feelings and experiences of racialisation, which could potentially be at odds with experiences of those of other ethnic origin or gender.

Like other researchers (Schneider and Arnot 2018), we found it challenging to recruit migrant parents. Due to the limited access, we asked parents to indicate their willingness to be interviewed by providing their contact details on the parental permission for their child to participate. Despite offering translators and shopping vouchers as a compensation for their time, only parents (12 mothers, 3 fathers, 1 aunt) of 12 participating students agreed to be interviewed about their views on education in England. They represented the following nationalities: Poland, Latvia, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and Ukraine. Furthermore, a Hungarian mother whose daughter was attending a different secondary school took part in research. One of these interviews was conducted with the help of a Bulgarian translator, a further one was conducted in Polish and four in Russian by the lead researcher herself. The rest of the interviews were in English. None of these parents belonged to the Roma community. They were working in construction, cleaning, restaurant sectors, and in factories. The exception was two mothers who

held more professional jobs – an EAL teaching assistant at a secondary school and a freelance journalist doing work for her country of origin. One of the mothers was not working at the time of the research. Parents’ and teachers’ pseudonyms cited in the paper were assigned, while students’ pseudonyms largely reflect their own choices.⁵

The paper analyses the discourses found in interviews with students, parents and teachers that illustrate themes of racialisation of Eastern European migrants and their negotiation of discrimination in educational settings. Our analysis of the various elements of racism is underpinned by the theoretical framework presented above that conceptualises ‘whiteness’ of these migrants as a set of norms and values, cultural capital and contingent social hierarchies (Garner 2006) intersecting with class, language and ethnicity, as well as overlaying these identities.

Marginalised whiteness

The first set of racialising discourses young people felt they had to negotiate on a daily basis reflected the negative popular and political framing of Eastern European immigration in England, particularly in the context of financial austerity. Anti-immigration reports in tabloid media and pronouncements of mainstream politicians, as well as temporary restrictions placed on the free movement of labour from accession countries, contributed to a ‘darkening’ of this new wave of EU migrants (Fox, Morosanu, and Szilassy 2012). Young people’s articulations such as ‘they don’t want us here’ (Edita, 17, Lithuanian, East Anglia), ‘the English are angry on us’ (Steponas, 14, Lithuanian, East Anglia) and ‘we are useless for the country’ (Alicja2, 16, Polish, London) reflect exclusionary discourses of the illegitimate ‘immigrant’ presence.

The transformations in migration patterns following EU enlargement widen the discussion of racism. The students we interviewed felt that Eastern European migrants were seen as the Other not only by the White British majority, but also by more settled minority

ethnic groups that could claim a non-immigrant identity. A Polish student, for example, described how Black or Asian students could call Polish students ‘an immigrant’ and question about ‘why they are here and so on’ (Olek, 14, London). Interestingly, he stated that while other students ‘can say something bad about the Polish, we can’t say anything back to them’ – a fear students linked to the tendency of labelling Poles as ‘racist’ (Glenn and Barnett 2007), as suggested in this interview extract with two Polish girls:

Aliceb: They all think we are racist.

Alicja: That’s true.

Int.: How come they think so?

Alicja: I ... because in Poland we don’t have much people from other race, so they think that we are like ... that we don’t like them, we are rude to them, yeah.

Aliceb: And we are not racist.

We suggest that the above constructions also position Polish people as ‘ignorant’ and outside of the middle-class ‘multicultural’ British value system, supporting a cultural and class-based hierarchy of minority inferiority.

This leads to a second prominent set of racialised perceptions about Eastern European migrants discussed in student interviews. In this case, their whiteness is marginalised based on values and norms relating to the ‘working-classness’. The narrow and selective media plotlines around ‘crime’, ‘uncivilised behaviour’ and ‘benefit shopping’ (Fox, Morosanu, and Szilassy 2012) relate Eastern European migrants to popular constructions of British White working classes as ‘feral’, ‘feckless’ and ‘promiscuous’ (Gillborn 2010, 15). Indeed, in our study young people from all national backgrounds believed that British people essentialised Eastern European migrants as ‘always drink’, ‘every single Saturday or Friday they’re always drunk’, ‘all they do is drink and smoke 24/7’, ‘lazy and in some way heavy drinkers’, ‘swear a lot’, ‘party all the time’, ‘want to fight’, ‘really aggressive’, ‘violent’, ‘abuse benefits’, ‘jobless’, ‘do things on the edge of law’, and so on. These moral deficiencies, also seen in prior research

(Gibson 2015; Dawney 2008) as being indiscriminately ascribed to Eastern European migrants, constituted them as outside of and resistant to normal social norms or somehow uncontrollable and, thus, alien:

I say hooligans because every time I meet some English people they say I'm Polish or Ukrainian, 'cause they're confused, and they say, 'Oh these hooligans, you always drink and why you want to fight?' (Jack, 16, Ukrainian, London)

I don't know, they just think if someone is from Lithuania or Poland, they are hooligans; they drink vodka in the park or something. They start to beat up some guys, or something. (Marcin, 16, Polish, East Anglia)

While this 'hooligan' identity and derogatory representation of Eastern Europeans' lifestyles are disproportionately associated with Eastern European men (see also Gibson 2015), some girls in our sample described being subjected to similar deviant framing:

Yeah, some people come up to you and ask you for cigarettes because they think, just because you're Lithuanian, that you smoke, but it's not true. (Kristina, 16, Lithuanian, London)

This deviance, based on an intersectional position based on migration status, class and gender positions Eastern Europeans as on the periphery of society and outside of acceptable normalised whiteness.

There were some mentions of seemingly acceptable stereotypes, which positioned Eastern European migrants as 'hardworking' and hence more 'deserving' than the poor, immoral and welfare-dependent underclass (Gillborn 2010). However, this construction strongly implied that Eastern European migrants are 'good for work' in low paid, undesirable and difficult jobs (see also McVittie and McKinlay 2018; Downey 2008). As Alicja2 (16, Polish, London) commented, 'British people won't do the kind of work that Polish people would do'. Most commonly, students spoke of Eastern European migrants being homogenised

as ‘builders’ or ‘plumbers’, who work hard but, as discussed above, are characterised as ‘vulgar’, ‘harsh’ and ‘uneducated’.

These popular racialised notions of what it means to be an Eastern European migrant were reinforced in school. According to Alicja (17, Polish, London), teachers expected ‘my parents ... my father to be a builder’. This class-inflected occupational stereotype was expressed about young people’s career aspirations too:

Well, basically, since I have been doing construction in a built-up environment for my GCSE, they have been saying that I’ll have something to do with that. (Alicja, 17, Polish, London)

A group of Polish girls in one of the London schools mocked this crude assumption by teachers:

Lola: No, maybe not different [expectations], but they have these stereotypes, like usually of boys, not us –

Charlie: Oh, they’re going to be builders.

Lola: They’re going to be builders, yeah.

Charlie: All builders [laughter].

In a different school, Polish boys recalled a lesson about ‘why is my plumber Polish?’ that singled them out and exposed them to bullying:

Like, obviously my friends after were like, ‘Oh you’re going to become a plumber.’ But in like a joke way, so I didn’t take it too seriously. (Pawel, 16, Polish, London)

Asked about their perceptions of Eastern European students’ career aspirations, teachers like Mr Kelly (Art, East Anglia) assumed that ‘a lot of the boys from Eastern Europe will go on as builders or mechanics’. He went on to explain why he thought that ‘the boys will do better in practical subjects, something that they know that they can earn cash with’:

I think their attitude to Art and certainly Art education or mainly education is, you know, do I get a job out of it. And I don’t think they see themselves as artists or they don’t see

themselves in the way in which the culture of Britain or I suppose Europe, or Western Europe, and the idea that, you know, you can be a creative person and make money out of it or you can do a deal out of it or you can do something. (Mr Kelly, Art, East Anglia)

The intersections of classed, culturalist and ethnicised constructions within this teacher's quote reveal hierarchies within the European groups thought of as 'white'. While Eastern Europeans are racialised as ignorant and uncivilised in relation to Western Europeans, the boundaries between the two groups can however be reduced if a demonised 'white' identity, such as Roma, is brought into conversation.

Pathologised whiteness

The ways in which ethnicity and class intersect to position white minorities within the hierarchy of acceptability as more or less 'deserving' were particularly evident in how mainstream teachers constructed differences among Eastern European learners. While the attitude to learning of non-Roma students was often described as 'keen' and 'positive' (most often, of the Poles, who had also been settled in England for longer), Roma students were openly pathologised:

Yeah, different to the Czech-Slovaks, they tend to be a bit more lethargic and I think that's a deeply entrenched cultural thing with some of them, particularly the Romas. (Ms Thomas, Maths, East Anglia)

A lot of them seem to be quite keen to do ICT, not all, but most, but then I'm talking about the Polish and the Lithuanians more and maybe the Latvians, but as for the [Roma] Czech and the Slovak, I think possibly not. (Mr Hughes, ICT & PSHE, East Anglia)

Roma learners were invariably spoken about in deficit terms as 'populating most of the bottom sets and making limited progress', 'not familiar with the concept of secondary school', 'academically not bright in [their] own language', 'not necessarily interested', 'see school as just somewhere to mess around', 'don't abide by the rules' and the like. These descriptions

reveal the position of the Roma students as ‘impossible bodies’ in schools, at the bottom of the ‘hierarchy of the other’ (Youdell 2006). A Slovak mother we interviewed in the East of England argued that, being taken for a Roma, she experienced difficulties in enrolling her son in the secondary school of her choice. Indeed, Eastern European Roma were informally classified within schools as those children who were ‘unlikely to contribute to a school’s image and performance’ (Gewirtz 2002, 169) in examinations league-tables:

I don’t know this officially but you kind of hear it in conversation with people responsible for admission that we don’t really want Czech or Slovak origin students because they have history of underachieving (...) that’s the general idea that the school has, that if you get a Czech or a Slovak, which to be honest, here, they are all Roma, that they won’t make the progress, so therefore when it comes to Ofsted judging you, you can’t win, because Ofsted won’t say, ‘Okay, Czech Roma kids don’t make the progress, so therefore you’ll get 40% benchmark target’. They’ll just say, ‘You haven’t got it and therefore you are going to be special measures’. To be honest, that only really here applies to the Czech and Slovak group. The Poles are basically really welcomed because they do, in terms of attainment, a lot better than white British kids, as a general stereotype. (Mr Burke, Geography, East Anglia)

Here we note the policy context of needing students to ‘make the progress’ that contributes to racialisation, where instead of overall attainment being the key measure, measures of ‘valued added’ dominate – described as the ‘reification of progress’ (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes 2016). In this context, Roma students are seen as ‘don’t make the progress’ that will prevent the school’s data being such that Ofsted will put them into ‘special measures’ (the term for when a school is at risk of failure). Roma are seen as damaging to the school’s data, while the Polish students are seen as having a positive impact because they attain ‘a lot better than white British kids’ of presumably working-class background.

These teachers’ attitudes to Eastern European Roma mirror and draw from a long history of racism against existing Gypsy and Traveller communities ‘on account of their cultural “differences”, which are seen to depart from the “norm”’ (D’Arcy 2014, 49). Research suggests

that racialising discourses of Gypsy and Traveller identity position them so that ‘their White identity is one that is unclean, distant and alien to other members of society’ (Bhopal 2011, 326). Within schools, Gypsy and Traveller students are labelled as ‘illiterate’ or ‘troublemakers’ (ibid.). However, such racism is deemed ‘acceptable’ due to Gypsy and Travellers’ ‘whiteness’, as well as due to perceived lack of respect on their part for the school norms and ‘legitimate’ expectations around parental engagement and attendance (ibid.). Similarly, Eastern European Roma students are described in our study as failing to make use of the school system, and thus failing to behave in ways associated with the ‘good migrant’, who takes responsibility for their own assimilation (Bradbury 2014).

As discussed next, another seemingly acceptable discourse within the school around addressing the EAL ‘problem’ (Blackledge 2000) overlays ethnic differences within Eastern European migrant group, discriminating against all learners.

Linguistic otherness

The majoritarian narrative that ‘English-is-*all*-that-matters’ institutionalises linguisticism as a form of racism in schools (Mitchell 2013). A number of students perceived there to be prejudice in teachers’ expectations of their academic performance, based on their EAL status. ‘When I came’, Max recalled in the discussion about lower expectations of Polish students, teachers ‘thought that I would not learn English’. Having mastered English, he felt that teachers started treating him ‘like a normal person’ and ‘gave a higher level to do’ (Max, 13, Polish, London). This represents the ‘deficit-laden’ (ibid.) discourse of EAL in operation, distancing EAL learners from the monolingual norm: Max was not treated as a ‘normal’ person until he could speak English well.

Another boy (who had achieved a 'B' grade pass in maths GCSE despite a predicted 'D') believed that the combination of being 'foreign' and lacking full proficiency in English led to teachers' low expectations of himself:

I wouldn't say [teachers have] high [expectations of me], but, like, normal, like, even low, because they don't expect me to get as much because, as I said, I'm foreign and I came not long ago here, so as well they're thinking that, yeah, my English is this and that and (...) it's really often here that if you don't speak English, they think you don't have that much knowledge. (Czeslaw, 16, Polish, East Anglia)

Importantly, Czeslaw argues that his lack of English is seen as a lack of knowledge, rather than a lack of ability *to display* that knowledge. As such, his learning up to the point of migration is disregarded.

This tendency for lower expectations of migrant students resonates strongly with the experiences of the Polish girls whose predicted grades made them think they were 'not a good student': 'the government expected, for example, me to get Ds and Es just because my parents didn't speak English or didn't have university degrees' (Kasia, 17, Polish, East Anglia). Despite successfully achieving, as one of them put it, 'the highest results [at GCSEs] from everyone, even the English people', they recalled treatment based on ethnic bias:

Kasia: I remember when we had a GCSE results day, Kinga and I went together and we received envelopes and we passed every single GCSE, and the teacher who gave us the envelope and who was next to us was so surprised, because we're Polish.

Kinga: She's like, 'oh, you've actually passed your GCSEs'.

Justyna (18, Polish, East Anglia), despite having been educated in England from primary years, also recounted discouraging treatment based on the majoritarian overemphasis on language. She had wanted to study Science at A-level (exams at age 18), but felt her aspirations were undermined by teachers, telling her that this subject required 'high English'.

These low expectations, crosscut by classed and gendered assumptions, have real power to shape life chances of this minoritised group. After Justyna's aspiration to study Science was stifled, she took A-levels in Art, Psychology and ICT and was at the time of the interview in the process of applying for a stereotypically feminine Psychology and Counselling degree. We also observed a trend of boys focusing on 'practical' GCSEs or BTECs (qualifications taken at age 16) and thinking about technical careers or higher education qualifications in ICT, design and technology, engineering, and construction. Although the boys in question liked these subjects, it could be argued that teachers were 'channelling' them into this field due to the preconceptions of these EAL students' disadvantaged position, leading them to assume that these students are more likely to succeed in vocational areas. The teachers' perceptions of young people's abilities and future academic possibilities clearly highlight the class-specific inflections of higher education participation in the UK (Archer and Leathwood 2003).

Some of the teacher interviews reflected research which has identified that minority ethnic students and those who receive support for English are disproportionately allocated to less prestigious academic routes and streams (Shapiro 2014; Mitchell 2013; Gillborn and Youdell 2000; Troyna and Siraj-Blatchford 1993). Although an English subject teacher we interviewed recognised as problematic the practice of allocating newly arrived Eastern European students to 'low ability groups to help them acquire language', he admitted that within the school advocating for putting 'students into sort of middle ability groups to give them the best of both worlds [is] a very kind of difficult line to stand' (Mr Jones, English, East Anglia). Hence these students' futures are defined and limited by their position in relation to what Hopson (2003, after Du Bois) calls 'the problem of the language line', whereby 'their *language* needs' are 'misread as *learning* difficulties' (Gillborn and Youdell 2000, 96, emphasis in the original). Due to the lack of tacit knowledge acquired at a young age from growing up in

England, teachers constructed success in humanities as particularly beyond the realm of possibility:

It's harder to do well in subjects such as English, where you need the cultural understanding, as well as the language understanding (...) I mean, things like possibly history, where if it's very much based on kind of a cultural understanding of how things have always been and what's normal and what's less normal, for want of a better word, then that might be difficult, if you haven't got that background of knowledge. (Ms Anderson, English, East Anglia)

Ms Anderson here relates Eastern European students' performance to a lack of a specific form of distinctly 'White British' cultural capital, especially its middle-class configuration (Archer 2008). This deficit discourse positions the students as having come from a country where people have a different conception of what is 'normal'; the cultural capital of marginalised groups is 'unrecognized and unacknowledged' (Yosso 2005).

Importantly, students appeared to be aware of mainstream teachers' perceptions of their potential in different subjects:

I think it depends on the subject. Some [teachers] do just think that we're not able to get there. In some subjects, like engineering or construction, I think they're more likely to give us a chance; they trust more in us. But in science and maths, there are a bit less expectations. (Steve, 17, Polish, London)

The above observation is notable given that Steve was in the top maths set and that subject teachers often noted that Eastern European students had come to English secondary schools 'well prepared' mathematically. One teacher described Polish and Lithuanian students as 'really hot on numbers' and as 'outstrip[ing] even the White British population on that' (Ms Thomas, Maths, East Anglia). In the same vein, Mr Rizvi came across students ('whether it's Year 7 or Year 10 or 11') announcing their pre-existing maths knowledge – 'We learnt this in Year 4 in Lithuania', or 'We learnt this in Year 4 in Poland'. However, while agreeing that 'the arithmetic

ability is there' (Mr Ray, Maths, London), teachers transmitted a notable lack of confidence in the *examination success* of these students:

They won't get the question right, unless you explain it to them or the teaching assistant explains it to them. (Mr Rizvi, Maths, East Anglia)

These examples illustrate how teachers normalise average attainment for EAL students, whose educational success tends to be 'associated with a notion of "distance travelled" (or "value added")' and 'seen as a matter of individual responsibility, motivation and effort' by individuals 'realizing their potential' (Archer 2008, 93). Teachers also construct the motivation of immigrant and refugee students as their 'mentality' and dismiss their success as 'inauthentic' – based on effort rather than intelligence (Bradbury 2013, 558). These discourses work together to reify the White, middle-class, assertive and confident student (and, we propose, by extension native English speaking and UK-born) as the desirable norm (Archer 2008; Archer and Francis 2007; Blackledge 2000; Leung, Harris, and Rampton 1997).

To address the discriminatory practices and beliefs based on students' (lack of) command of the English language, Eastern European parents attributed significant importance to English proficiency, often at the cost of literacy in their home language. For instance, a Polish mother said she would prefer that her son did 'not contact with Poland [and Polish] language' to remove language barriers and 'to start to think like English people' (Irena, London). Instead, she lamented, 'All his holidays he spends in Poland and the Czech [Republic]. And after when he is back (...) he needs to adapt again'. Another mother, asked about whether she considered complementary ethnic schooling for her son, replied with several categorical 'No's and provided the following explanation:

I want him to speak English and to... He knows Romanian to speak. He didn't have the chance to learn to write [in] Romanian very good because he got only three years in

Romania in school, so... But I noted he [is] not interested, you know. I want him to know English very good. (Crina, Romanian, London)

Another typical comment was ‘we leave our language in the second place because we speak it anyway, we speak the language at home’ (Radu, Romanian, London).

These families have taken on the hierarchy of languages, which places English as the superior language, and their language as inferior. They accept the majoritarian story of ‘English-is-*all*-that-matters’ (Mitchell 2013), and that their language is something to be exchanged for minimising social distance. In Liu and Evans’ (2016) study, too, Eastern European migrant parents reportedly ‘urged [children] to use English as much as possible for various reasons, such as “learn English to help mum”, “make friends”, or even “become an English girl”’ (559). This last point illustrates a tension – while parents’ adaptive strategies address wider inequalities related to their racialised position in England, they also imply that racial constructs can be ‘normalised’ through learning English and professing ‘Englishness’ (Thomas 2012). We discuss this next in relation to their whiteness.

Whiteness as a resource

Following on from the above discussion and wider research, linguistic differences (and ‘deficiencies’) attract attention to the foreign-ness of Eastern European migrants and serve as a basis for discrimination (Moore 2013). However, phenotypically white Eastern European parents were implicitly aware that their children, unlike some other migrant groups, could ‘hide’ their immigrant status through acquiring the English language and, most importantly, ‘English’ accents. The desire of parents in our study to profess ‘Englishness’ is asserted in the following extract:

And I’m excited because both my girls speak, both my daughters, speak very fluently and very nicely in English. And if we meet somebody who doesn’t know that we are from Hungary, and they speak with our children, they always think that they we are an English

family, because they have no accent, they are grammatically correct and they speak much better than we do. (Etel, Hungarian, Coventry)

This ability to ‘pass’ as an English family, which Etel sees as beneficial because she is aware that this will reduce the discrimination her daughters face in education and employment, is only open to these girls because they are racialised as white. Their migrant status places them on the margins of idealised whiteness, but good English language skills and the right accent afford them the greater privileges of whiteness. In the same vein, Thomas (2012) argues that Polish immigrant students focus on the English language as ‘a way to fit in’, ‘move forward in life’ and ‘access money and power’ (507-8). In Lopez Rodriguez’s (2010) research, a Polish mother pointed out that she wanted her son ‘to learn English from the English so he can have a proper accent’ (350). This association between language and accent and the ability to ‘move forward’ demonstrates how Eastern Europeans’ whiteness could serve as a potent resource for gaining access to relative privileges and acceptance. This also exemplifies one of the assumptions of CRT that ‘White people do not all behave in identical ways and they do not all draw similar benefits – but they do all benefit to some degree’ (Gillborn 2010, 4).

Research on the experiences of the Irish migrants in the UK and the USA demonstrates that ‘the boundaries between dominant and dominated whites can also become minimal and sometimes irrelevant’ (Garner 2006, 267). In particular, the Irish’s identification with white dominance that marginalises people of colour helped to mainstream the cultural ‘content’ of Irish whiteness (ibid.). In our study, Polish young people’s worry about being seen as ‘racist’ and not being able to ‘say anything back’ to other minority ethnic students who bullied them about being ‘an immigrant’ suggest that they identify with the dominant White ethnic majority (Nayak 1999). Like British Cypriot students in Anthias’ (2002) study, Eastern Europeans seem to understand racism as something targeted at non-White communities: a Cypriot boy in Anthias’ study claimed ‘I’m European. Greeks don’t get a lot of racism, not like the blacks do

or the Indians' (504). The typical replies by our students to our questioning about racism were 'no one was racist to me' (Jack, 16, Ukrainian, London), 'I haven't seen racism' (Adam2, 14, Romanian, London), 'may be a low percentage but we're not sure' (Justin, 16, Lithuanian, London) or 'I personally haven't experienced any sort of discrimination' (Karolina, 16, Lithuanian, London). The denial of racism could imply young people's discursive claims at 'higher' racial status as white and European – for example, it is worth noting that Central and Eastern European countries, as former societies within European empires, inherited the Enlightenment ideas of nationalism and racism and that the EU accession was presented across the region as 'a return to Europe' (Samaluk 2014, 374-8).

Eastern European parents' enthusiastic approval of the English education is another example of the belief of these migrants that adopting dominant values will lead to success in England:

They [at school] do help me already and I adjust to their rules, so that everything goes well, and that's enough for me (...) After I came to this country and I decided to live here, I accepted their conditions and their rules, their learning style, their lifestyle, so that everything is super. (Gloria, Polish, London)

This mother of five children, employed as a cleaner, spoke about a lack of motivation as the only foreseeable barrier for her children: 'It's simply a mobilisation; it's simply – "I want to go to university, I want to have a good job, I want to earn good money"' (Gloria, Poland, London). Inese from Latvia also espoused meritocratic ideals in relation to her son's future, 'If he wants it, he'll do it' (East Anglia). English schools, as another parent put it, 'give everything to those who work hard' (Juris, Latvia, East Anglia). On the backdrop of parents' compensatory strategies to attain power via perfecting English, their adherence to colour-blind (and arguably middle-class) meritocratic values could be viewed as another tactic to negotiate their status and escape membership in the essentialised migrant group (see also Fox, Morosanu, and Szilassy

2015; Lopez Rodriguez 2010).

Conclusion

This paper represents a significant contribution to the literature on race and racism in educational context. It set out to analyse the experiences of racism in English schools among relatively recent ‘white’ Eastern European migrants. Drawing on student, parent and teacher interviews, we have analysed the complexity of ethnic disadvantage and privilege amongst this diverse group of migrants. Our data have shown very clearly that racism is an issue for these students. In a context of widespread anti-immigration discourses, young people from Eastern Europe are seen as a new ‘Other’ in schools, both by the white majority and more settled minority ethnic groups. Young people are also subjected to a distinctive set of racialising cultural stereotypes linked to social class as being heavy drinkers and smokers, jobless, aggressive and so on. This undermines Eastern European students’ ability to ‘belong’, and also links to parents’ implicit views about the ‘lesser’ status of their home language and their desire to escape the ‘immigrant’ label through acquiring an English language, English education, and a professional job for their children. The seemingly positive stereotype of Eastern European migrants as being ‘hard workers’ associate them with working-class jobs such as being a builder or plumber. The data suggest that teachers may be influenced by this stereotype in their expectations of young people’s career pathways. Furthermore, our findings reveal how these students’ EAL status restricts the curriculum and courses on offer and determines low expectations from teachers. Some ethnic groups, such as the Roma, experience overt racism from staff.

Considered through a lens influenced by CRT, this example of Eastern European migrant students reveals much about the complex operation of racisms in the school system in England: these young people are directly affected by discourses based on racist stereotypes, but

perhaps feel less able to challenge this because they are racialised as white, and therefore seen as immune from ‘racism’. There is a risk that, like the Traveller families in Bhopal’s research, ‘when they experienced racism it was not seen in the same way as the racism experienced by non-White groups and not taken as seriously’ (Bhopal 2011, 326). However, Eastern European students do benefit from whiteness, as parents feel motivated to help their children become Anglicised; this possibility is open to them in ways it remains closed for other minoritised groups. Their position is one of marginal whiteness, however, linked to the associations with manual jobs, their ethnicity and linguistic Otherness. The racism that Eastern Europeans, or *racisms* more accurately, experience exists alongside older racist attitudes towards longer-established migrant communities in England. As seen throughout history in many contexts, new migrant communities are subject to new forms of discrimination, while the White ideal remains dominant (Erel, Murji and Nahaboo 2016).

This research highlights the substantial work to be done in preparing teachers, who are currently overwhelmingly from white majority ethnic background (DfE 2018), to understand forms of covert non-colour based racism and tackle stereotyping that may guide their practice and limit the opportunities of the migrant students. As Campbell (2015) points out, teacher stereotypes about students are not formed in vacuum. They are reflective of the widespread cultural and social representations of different minority ethnic groups, as well as deficit discourses that permeate the education system, including policy initiatives targeting working-class children, EAL learners and so on, which might inadvertently suggest that these groups are ‘deficient in ability and potential’ and ‘feed into [teachers’] differentiated expectations’ (ibid., p. 538). Thus, resources could usefully be directed towards developing reflective and self-aware practitioners, able to recognise the complexity of individual differences and learn to engage in a balanced and constructive manner with all students.

Notes

1. See for more details Table 1 in Tereshchenko and Archer's (2014) report, produced using statistical data on NALDIC's website www.naldic.org.uk.
2. The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) is the chief inspection and regulation department responsible for inspecting educational institutions in the UK.
3. Two individual student interviews were conducted in Russian, and one in Ukrainian.
4. Although the dynamic proved to work well, it was not always possible to form groups with participants of the same ethnic background due to small numbers of students of similar age from certain backgrounds.
5. The majority of the students were willing to choose their pseudonyms and thus English names in the article reflect their choice. We did not question them about the chosen names and therefore find it hard to be certain whether their choices are related to feeling of belonging in England. Many students left the pseudonym field blank, in which case a name arguably reflecting their ethnic origin was assigned by the lead researcher. We are conscious though of the power of participant naming process (Lahman et al. 2015).

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