



Written by [Thomas Sowell](#) on December 3, 2013

A Challenge to Our Beliefs

Depressing news about black students scoring far below white students on various mental tests has become so familiar that people in different parts of the ideological spectrum have long ago developed their different explanations for why this is so. But both may have to do some rethinking, in light of radically different news from England.



The November 9th-15th issue of the distinguished British magazine *The Economist* reports that, among children who are eligible for free meals in England's schools, black children of immigrants from Africa meet the standards of school tests nearly 60 percent of the time — as do immigrant children from Bangladesh and Pakistan. Black children of immigrants from the Caribbean meet the standards less than 50 percent of the time.

At the bottom, among those children who are all from families with low enough incomes to receive free meals at school, are white English children, who meet the standards 30 percent of the time.

The Economist points out that, in one borough of London, white students scored lower than black students in any London borough.

These data might seem to be some kind of fluke, but they confirm the observations in a book titled *Life at the Bottom* by British physician Theodore Dalrymple. He said that, among the patients he treated in a hospital near a low-income housing project, he could not recall any white 16-year-old who could multiply nine by seven. Some could not even do three times seven.

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What jolts us is not only that this phenomenon is so different from what we are used to seeing in the United States, but also that it fits neither the genetic nor the environmental explanation of black-white educational differences here.

These white students in England come from the same race that produced Shakespeare and the great scientist Sir Isaac Newton, among other world class intellects over the centuries. But today many young whites in England are barely literate, and have trouble with simple arithmetic. Nor are these white students the victims of racial discrimination, much less the descendants of slaves.

With the two main explanations for low performances on school tests obviously not applicable in England, there must be some other explanation. And once there is some other explanation in this case, we have to wonder if that other explanation — whatever it is — might also apply in the United States, to one degree or another.



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In other words, maybe our own explanations need reexamination.

What do low-income whites in England and ghetto blacks in the United States have in common? It cannot be simply low incomes, because children from other groups in the same low-income brackets outperform whites in England and outperform blacks in America.

What low-income whites in England and ghetto blacks in the United States have in common is a generations-long indoctrination in victimhood. The political left in both countries has, for more than half a century, maintained a steady and loud drumbeat of claims that the deck is stacked against those at the bottom.

The American left uses race and the British left uses class, but the British left has been at it longer. In both countries, immigrants who have not been in the country as long have not been so distracted by such ideology into a blind resentment and lashing out at other people.

In both countries, immigrants enter a supposedly closed society that refuses to let anyone rise — and they nevertheless rise, while the native-born at the bottom remain at the bottom.

Those who promote an ideology of victimhood may imagine that they are helping those at the bottom, when in fact they are harming them, more so than the society that the left is denouncing.

We in America have gotten used to vast gaps between blacks and whites on test scores. But this was not always the case, in places where there was anything like comparable education.

Back in the 1940s, before the vast expansion of the welfare state and the ideology of victimhood used to justify it, there was no such gap on test scores between black schools in Harlem and white, working class schools on New York's lower east side.

You can find the data on pages 40-41 of an article of mine in the Fall 1981 issue of *Teachers College Record*, a journal published by Columbia University — that is, if you think facts matter more than rhetoric or social visions.

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