



IMPROVING PRACTICE: A WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH TO
RAISING THE ACHIEVEMENT OF AFRICAN CARIBBEAN YOUTH

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

In 1996 The Runnymede Trust produced a report on the lives and experiences of young African Caribbean men in Brixton. The report *This is Where I Live* detailed many of the crises affecting the lives of young Black men in relation to unemployment, conflictual relations with the police and high rates of imprisonment. An overriding theme, however, was the impact that negative educational experiences had on the life, careers and chances of the young men featured in the report.

For many young Black men a series of exclusionary cycles begin in compulsory schooling – manifested in confrontational relationships with teachers, exclusion from school and failure to gain formal qualifications in proportion to other ethnic groups. For many years, work has been conducted by individual teachers in schools and within community-based education projects to address and stem the cycles of educational disadvantage experienced by young Black males. However, much of this work takes place in isolation, and thus the positive benefits young Black pupils may gain from this intervention are fractured and partial.

In view of this evidence, an action-based research project was set up to explore in greater detail the nature of pupil experiences and the factors that contribute to their educational disadvantage. The project also examined how the many significant adults in the educational lives of young Black people – parents, teachers, mentors, youth and community workers – attempt to counter the processes which alienate large groups of young Black men from education every year. This report is based both on the findings of that project and on the many discussions which took place in seminars and conferences with leading experts and practitioners in the field.

The reasons for Black pupils' educational disadvantage have been explored in research reports and published books. The aim of this report is to highlight, explore and interrogate the practical strategies adopted by relevant educational agencies, including schools, homework centres and community organisations, to raise the achievement of African Caribbean pupils.

Much has been said both about the concept of Black underachievement, and about the focus on it within 'race' and education literature (The Runnymede Trust, 1997; Gillborn and Gipps, 1996). There are Black pupils who are achieving well and there are those whose achievement is improving through their involvement in supportive projects. In addition to this, there are schools, individual teachers and committed parents and members of Black communities who specifically encourage and support the educational improvement of young Black people. It is as important, therefore, to learn from their strategies, which may not always have been successful, as it is to document the increasing difficulties experienced by Black pupils in

schools. More importantly, it is necessary to document what Black pupils themselves feel successfully facilitates their learning and development in order that good practice can continuously improve and evolve.

The research context

The educational disadvantage experienced by ethnic minority pupils, and African Caribbean pupils in particular, has been long documented. The Policy Studies Institute (PSI) study in 1979 found that although African Caribbean males and females gained relatively similar qualifications, they were achieving less well than their Indian counterparts. The Swann report in 1985 also reported the underachievement of African Caribbean pupils in comparison to White and Indian pupils. These findings were replicated in various academic studies in the 1980s, and resurfaced in recent research reviews (Gillborn and Gipps, 1996; The Runnymede Trust, 1997).

Although overall pupil performance in GCSE has improved over the years, African Caribbean pupils have not shared equally in these increasing rates of achievement. In 1996 45 per cent of White pupils achieved five or more GCSE grades A-C, compared to 38 per cent of Asian and 23 per cent of Black pupils. A larger percentage of Black pupils left compulsory schooling with no formal qualifications. Compared to other ethnic groups defined as 'Black' by many local authority and other institutional classifications, African pupils often achieve higher GCSE results than their African Caribbean peers, and African Caribbean boys are more likely than other ethnic groups to complete compulsory schooling with little or no formal qualifications (Office for National Statistics, 1996).

This research points to the important fact that there is considerable diversity both between and within ethnic minority groups. Whereas African Caribbean pupils have been shown to underperform in public examinations, with many leaving compulsory schooling without having gained any formal qualifications, African Caribbean boys in particular have been shown to be the group which experiences disproportionately low GCSE examination results, as well as exclusion from school. Also, it is clear that 'Asian' is too general a term to incorporate the very different experiences of Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Indian pupils.

The policy context

Criticisms have been made concerning the use of the success measurement of five A-C grades at GCSE level. This means of measuring achievement has been used to distinguish between successful and non-successful schools and local education authorities. However, only a minority of young people achieve five or more A-C GCSE grades, which means that this measure does not take into



account general levels of achievement.

Recent education policy changes have included an increased focus on the issue of raising educational standards. Within the drive to raise standards, the measuring of success through publication of school league tables has been central. There has been some debate surrounding the focus within policy changes on choice, competitiveness and improved standards. The Education Reform Act 1988, and the subsequent education reforms of the previous government introduced many of these concepts, but in ways which did not seem to benefit Black pupils and their parents. The most recent Education White Paper (1997) also failed to explore the specific needs of Black pupils in relation to educational disadvantage, reflecting the 'deracialised' state of current education policy (Gillborn 1995).

The failure to engage directly with issues of 'race' within education policy is reflected in individual schools' processes which often contribute to the forms of educational disadvantage young Black people experience. Many of these processes have been documented at length by researchers and are continuously discussed by Black community members, parents and teachers. Within education literature, two main themes emerge:

- teacher expectation, and
- exclusion from school.

□ **Teacher expectation**

Past research has noted that African Caribbean students are more likely to be seen as having low academic ability by some teachers in schools (Gillborn 1990 and 1995, Mac an Ghaill 1988, Wright 1985, 1987 and 1992). African Caribbean pupils have often been compared unfavourably with South Asian pupils in research reports, and these comparisons have been used to suggest that 'race' cannot be an overriding factor in their educational disadvantage (James and Harris 1993).

However, the presumed low academic ability of Black children is often paired with that of the presumption of behavioural difficulty. Research which has noted the disproportionate representation of Black pupils in low ability bands or 'sets', also points to the practice of placing Black pupils in lower sets for behavioural, rather than academic, reasons. Black pupils are seen to exhibit more challenging behaviour (Gillborn 1990). Black males in particular are seen as more confrontational and less likely to obey school rules – the causes of which are often perceived to stem from particular aspects of peer group and youth culture (Sewell 1997, Mac an Ghaill 1994). The placing of Black pupils within low ability groups for behavioural reasons and the stereotypical assumptions which often inform these decisions, can only have a negative impact on the ability of these pupils to be entered for, and to achieve well in, formal qualifications at the end of compulsory schooling.

□ **Exclusion from school**

African Caribbean pupils are over-represented in school exclusion statistics and are up to six times more likely than

their White counterparts to experience an exclusion from school (Osler 1997a). The school exclusion of all pupils, regardless of ethnic background, has increased almost fourfold between 1990 and 1996. This increase, particularly among African Caribbean pupils, is at its greatest at the level of secondary education, but is also becoming more noticeable among primary school children (Parsons 1994, Hayden 1996). School exclusions have a very direct effect on the ability of pupils to achieve academically. The majority of permanently excluded pupils find it difficult to secure places at other schools – only one in five secondary students returns to full-time education (Parsons 1995) – and though each decision to exclude can be appealed by parents, the rate at which excludees are reinstated is low. Research has also highlighted the numbers of pupils, a large proportion of whom are Black, who simply fall through the net of education provision once they experience an exclusion (Bourne, Bridges & Searle 1994, Cohen *et al* 1994, Hayden 1996, Osler 1997 a & b).

In this respect, it is clear that large numbers of children can miss vital parts of their education as a result of an exclusion. It is also worth noting that many of the offences which lead to pupil exclusion include subjectively defined acts, such as failure to comply with school rules and insolence to teachers. In view of the teacher assumptions outlined above in relation to the 'challenging' behaviour of Black pupils, the control and criticism, which characterise much of the relationship between some Black pupils and their teachers, has a direct effect on the occurrence of Black pupil exclusion.

The time spent out of school while excluded, compounded with the failure of some schools to provide work for pupils to complete while at home, can prevent Black pupils from achieving their full potential in examinations.

Countering alienation from education

It is within this context of educational disadvantage and increasingly 'colour blind' education policy that this report is placed. The research upon which the report is based took place within nine secondary schools, situated in and around London and the Midlands, and a number of community-based projects. The aim of the research project was to enable practitioners to monitor, evaluate and reflect on the intervention work they were conducting with young Black people in schools and community organisations. The research was action-based, as it involved the collection of data to inform the development and improvement of educational initiatives.

As part of the research, a number of interviews and meetings were conducted with senior teaching staff and community organisation personnel within all of the participating institutions. These discussions gave them the opportunity to talk about the work they had been conducting with young Black pupils and the difficulties they had encountered.

A number of Black pupils were also interviewed or asked to complete questionnaires about their opinions of the various supportive programmes in which they had

been involved'. These conversations and questionnaire responses revealed that young Black people are aware of those teaching strategies which they feel facilitate their ability to learn and improve their performance. They also revealed just how much young Black people depend upon the significant adults around them to support their educational, social and cultural development.

In addition to the teachers, youth and community workers and pupils, a number of parents were also interviewed and a series of consultations took place with education practitioners. A conference was held in June 1997 which discussed many of the main themes of the research relating to issues of underachievement, school exclusion and societal perceptions of Black masculinity. Consultation meetings were held throughout the duration of the research project and the issues around achievement and young Black males resurfaced in all discussions. The level of debate generated by many of these issues in discussions with parents and education practitioners, illustrates that educational disadvantage continues to hamper the abilities of Black children to succeed academically and to fully participate in society. However, the concerns expressed by parents, teachers and other key practitioners are not reflected in the current emphasis on improved educational standards.

Further, though many schools may assert a commitment to improving the achievement of *all* pupils, the needs of ethnic minority pupils can become subsumed within wider targets. We are not suggesting that there are specific ways of teaching Black pupils, as this may only provide support for the placing of Black children in low-achievement sets and encourage the existence of 'sinbins'. If Black pupils are experiencing difficulty at school, then we believe that the way of addressing those difficulties should be specific.

Themes of this report

□ *Improving practice*

In view of the plethora of research which now exists around the issues of 'race' and schooling, one of the main themes of this report is on *improving practice* within schools.

As previously stated, there is already a focus within current education policy on the identification and sharing of good practice in schools in relation to teaching and learning. The focus of this report is on the *nature* of improvement because, in order for pupils and teachers to benefit from achievement initiatives, it is necessary that successful work be built upon continuously. Improvement work within schools must be ongoing and reflexive. To define specific pieces of work as simply good practice implies that improvement is not necessary, and ignores the fact that certain strategies may work well with some pupils but not with others.

Chapter two provides details of some of the school and community-based projects in schools around London and the Midlands. Particular aspects of their work are identified which illustrate the commitment of the adults who co-ordinate them to improve on their practice.

□ *'Race' specific interventions*

A recent published report, conducted by Amenta Marketing, highlighted that approximately 38 per cent of Black pupils asked would prefer to attend an all-Black school. The media interest that followed the publication of the report centred upon this issue, even though a number of other areas were also covered. Complex debates exist around the benefits of teaching Black pupils in programmes which are 'race' specific.

The issue of separate schools and classes for Black children has been one which can often prevent teachers and support staff from attempting to support Black pupils. Concerns are expressed by both Black and White teachers about 'ghettoising' Black pupils in Black only groups. Research has indicated that teachers are suspicious of the sorts of messages being conveyed to pupils in these environments (Reay and Mirza 1997). However, many community organisations currently organise supplementary schools and homework clubs which, though not specifically for Black children, do include them as the majority group. As Chapters three and four will illustrate, many of the Black pupils who are involved in these programmes welcome the focus on their ethnic identities and cultural heritage. These programmes are seen as inclusive for Black pupils as they rectify the silences within the National Curriculum around the histories and achievements of Black people.

□ *School and community links*

Another important theme in the report relates to the development of links between schools and community-based organisations and projects. In this respect, the report stands apart from past research on 'race' and education, by exploring how schools can enter into a dialogue with other agencies and conduct collaborative projects to raise ethnic minority pupil achievement. Though many schools are building links with their local communities, evidence of this is sparse and the relationships which arise out of these interactions are not always positive or successful. However, the strength of the relationship between Black pupils and their communities illustrates that communities can play an important part in re-engaging young Black pupils with education. Chapter five takes up the theme of out-of-school learning by looking specifically at the ways community-based projects can complement and support the work being conducted with Black children in schools.