

Underachievement: african caribbean



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Underachievement African Caribbean

Abstract

This study discusses various issues related to under achievement of African-Caribbean or Black boys in British schools. The study highlights the fact that there is a denial in the British educational system of race and racism and that this is reflected in the in-flexibility of many schools to consider the differential positioning of Black boys in the UK and the effect of their experiences in the school system and opportunities gained thereafter in the workplace.

In sum the study shows that there is clear evidence that African-Caribbean pupils have not shared or have been received equally in the increasing rates of average educational performance at various academic platforms.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Boys' underachievement has been a major concern within academic circles and among government bodies (Gorard, Gillborn) for quite a while. Ofsted 1996 highlighted the gap between the performance of boys and girls as the attainment continued to lower for boys as they move along the key stages. Coard explores some of the issues that black children faced three decades ago. Some of the abysmal failure of black children within the British school system includes:

- Racist policies and practices of the education authorities in the past
- Racism within the curriculum itself
- Low teacher expectation and how destructive a force this could be

- Inadequate black parental knowledge of and involvement in what was happening to their children (Coard 1971).

According to Coard, black children were deemed as Educationally Sub-Normal (ESN) and were excluded from mainstream. This issue coupled with racist policies and curriculum and low teacher expectation caused most of these children to encounter emotional disturbances which in the long run affected their overall performance of black children in Britain. Despite the odds, in the late 1960s and 1970s some black children were able to make it academically but the majority were not so lucky (Coard 1971).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the educational experiences of African-Caribbean boys in the UK. The main focus will be to identify the factors that have contributed to the poor academic performance of Black Boys over the years. Furthermore, this work would investigate the claim that there is a denial in the British educational system of race and racism and that this is reflected in the inflexibility of many schools to consider the differential positioning of Black boys in the UK and the effect of their experiences in the school system and opportunities gained thereafter in the workplace.

This work will draw on a study in which various stakeholders voice e. g. (Tony Sewell) their experiences of why Black Boys in Britain perform poorly in schools and also seek to identify alternative visions of schooling to re-engage Black males thereby increasing their prospect for a successful future.

Research Questions

- What is the relationship between under achievement and social exclusion of black boys studying in UK schools?
- How are schools dealing with the issue of student underachievement of black students studying in UK institutions?
- Are all black boys underachieving?
- Significance of the Study

This study is quite significant as it shows that high under-achievement rates are not just an issue for black pupils. In 2005-2006 the permanent under-achievement rate for special schools was 0. 54% compared with 0. 34% for secondary and 0. 04% for primary schools; overall, pupils with statements of special educational need were seven times more likely to be excluded from school than pupils without statements (DCSF, 2007).

Other groups who are over-represented in the statistics include children looked after by local authorities and children from Gypsy and traveller families, despite the behaviour of travelling pupils being generally good (OFSTED, 2006b). Links have been made between school under-achievement and long-term social under-achievement (Blyth & Milner, 2003), as have links between school under-achievement and juvenile crime (Graham & Bowling, 2005; Gilbertson, 2005); these links are also recognised by government as a policy issue (Social Under-achievement Unit, 2005).

For many pupils permanent under-achievement from school marks the end of their formal education: a recent report by the Audit Commission (2006)

suggests that only 15% of permanently excluded secondary pupils return to mainstream schooling.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

A review of the literature on student under achievement highlights the fact that ethnic monitoring of under-achievement was first introduced by the DCSF in the 2004-2005 national schools census. Data from that census indicates that although 'Black Caribbean' pupils form only 1.1% of the school population they represented 7.3% of those excluded from school and were around six times more likely to be excluded than their White peers.

The disproportionate under-achievement of black boys is a particularly serious problem because overall many more males than females are excluded: official statistics show the ratio to be 4.3 boys for each excluded girl. Nevertheless, within the female school population, girls identified as 'Black Caribbean' are also particularly vulnerable to under-achievement: the school census shows they accounted for 8.8% of excluded girls in 2004-2005 (DCSF, 2006) and are thus eight times more likely to be excluded than might be suggested by the ethnic composition of schools.

There is also evidence that African-Caribbean pupils have not shared equally in the increasing rates of average educational performance at GCSE. An OFSTED-commissioned review of research on the achievements of ethnic minority pupils over a 10 year period up to 2005 concludes that the relatively lower exam achievements of Caribbean pupils, especially boys in a wide range of academic and LEA research studies is a cause for concern.

The research evidence suggests that ‘ A combination of gender and racial stereotypes may make it more difficult for young black men to avoid being caught up in cycles of increasingly severe criticism and control’ (Gillborn & Gipps, 2006, pp. 29 and 58). For black families rising under-achievement rates, combined with boys’ relatively low levels of achievement in public examinations, amount to an educational crisis.

Under-achievement and Special Educational Needs

It has been suggested (for example, Norwich, 2004; Parffrey, 2004) that in some schools children may be excluded when it is required as assessment and provision for special educational needs (SEN). Analysis of permanent under-achievement from Birmingham schools during the 2006-2007 school year indicated that 53% of those excluded were on the schools’ special needs register.

The Code of Practice relating to special educational needs (DfE, 2004a) requires schools to draw up an individual education plan (IEP) for a child identified as having SEN and outlines a series of stages in which the school is responsible, in co-operation with support agencies, for meeting these needs. It can be argued from a personal experience and evidence from an interview with a teacher that most of the black boys that are underachieving are SEN children who comes under social emotional and behavioural difficulties and probably that is why they are underachieving because the have not been diagnosed for IEP to be made on them yet.

These are pupils whose learning and/or behavioural difficulties may be placing stress on teachers but for whom the amount of additional support is

limited. It is possible that some of these children's needs might have been met and under-achievement avoided if the school had been able to access appropriate additional support at an earlier stage.

Although official national statistics recognise the over-representation of children with SEN among those excluded from school, these statistics only count excluded pupils with a statement of special education need and thus record pupils with SEN as a minority (17%) of all under-achievements (DCSF, 2007). Analysis of the Birmingham data, which allows us to consider all pupils on the special needs register, indicates that over half the children permanently excluded from Birmingham schools have identified special educational needs.

If this pattern is replicated across the country, then it seems likely that the extent to which unmet special educational needs may be contributing to the problem of under-achievement has been under-estimated. It is possible that some LEAs with low proportions of children assessed as having special educational needs, both overall and from particular ethnic groups, may not be identifying children in need of SEN support. Where this correlates with high under-achievement rates, there is reason to suspect that neglected learning difficulties may lie behind some of the disciplinary problems.

Ethnicity and Reducing Under-achievement

An analysis of the number of groups under-achieving per secondary school over the three year period 2001-2003 with the number of under-achievement in the three years 2004-2006, in order to identify schools which had reduced the number of pupils permanently excluded in Birmingham,

show a reduction in the number of pupils excluded over this period, from an average of 11 to an average of seven per school.

Those secondary schools which had reduced their use of permanent exclusion had, overall, cut under-achievement by nearly half for all ethnic groups. This suggests that where schools had developed policies for reducing under-achievement, these had been equally effective for all ethnic groups.

Nevertheless, this still left black pupils to be over-represented among the under-achievement from these schools. The evidence suggests that if the problem of over-representation of black pupils is to be addressed and racial equality achieved then strategies which specifically address the needs of these children are important.

Since African-Caribbean pupils formed some 28% of excluded pupils and only 8% of the school population in Birmingham, I wished to argue whether this might be because African-Caribbean pupils are more likely to attend schools with high under-achievement rates.

A total of 14 schools with high under-achievement rates, i. e. schools which had permanently excluded 30 or more pupils in the 6 year period 2001-2006, were identified (two of them grant maintained schools). Of these, 11 had an African-Caribbean population of 8% or less and the other three had higher proportions of African-Caribbean children than for the city as a whole, ranging from 11 to 33%.

Sewell (1998), mentions that African-Caribbean boys were six times more likely to be excluded from school as compared to the other group.

Furthermore there are argument that these black boys were seen to be conformists in that they were seen to be accepting both the means and goals of schooling but they are most likely to be excluded.

There is evidence of an interview with a black boy on page 113 which goes further to prove that not all boys are the same. This particular point is important to my research as there seems to be the assertion that all black boys are underachieving and this is what this research seeks to address. Sewell unpacks some of the oversimplification that exists in the current debate about boys' underachievement.

He goes further to describe boys as ' a tip of the iceberg in a doomsday scenario within the school'. There seems to be a link between gender identity and anti-school attitude which makes peer group pressure which is sensitive in boys to allow the generalization to be made about boys as unified lumps, in this content as underachieving academically

Identifying Good Practice

The study sought to understand teachers' and head teachers' attitudes and approaches to under-achievement and to equal opportunities. Previous research studies have tended to ignore teachers' perspectives and the ways in which under-achievement merge into the lives of schools (Gillborn & Gipps, 2006), although Hayden's (2007) study of children excluded from primary schools does consider the perspectives of both head teachers and class teachers of excluded pupils.

My study addressed schools with low or declining under-achievement rates with the aim of identifying good practice in minimising the practice of under-achievement.

In particular, I wished to establish whether teachers in the case study schools felt supported in managing difficult or challenging pupil behaviour or whether a low under-achievement rate might be masking other problems and causing stress to individuals working in these schools. Where schools are able to avoid under-achievement we wished to identify the alternative strategies they adopt.

Teachers' Explanations of Rising Under-Achievement Rates

Teachers and head teachers in the case study schools were not asked about the impact of recent educational reforms, but as they reflected on pupil behaviour and their own attitudes to excluding pupils they made regular reference to the changing social policy context in which they are working.

They referred frequently to the impact which market forces in education have made on school discipline, increased teacher workloads, changed parental expectations and to how the National Curriculum had limited the scope for schools to meet individual needs and address pupils' personal and social behaviour.

They broadly agree with Charlton & David (2003), Blyth & Milner (2004), and Hevey (2004) and Hayden (2007) that increased competition between schools for pupils' and resources is a key underlying reason for a general rise in under-achievement.

As Parffrey (2004) argues, ' Naughty children are bad news in the market economy. No one wants them. They are bad for the image of the school, they are bad for the league tables, they are difficult and time-consuming, and they upset and stress the teachers'.

The teachers believed that although schools were all experiencing similar conditions, some had resisted excluding pupils who presented problems. In that have lower excluding rate such as their own, when teachers were working with numbers of children with behavioural difficulties, they argued that the costs of maintaining higher thresholds of tolerance were felt by teachers themselves, in terms of teacher stress and fatigue.

Many teachers in the study, notably those in primary schools who have responsibility for the whole curriculum, believed that the National Curriculum has led schools to accept a narrow view of education and, as Gray et al. (2004) have suggested, that ' it has diminished the importance of personal and social education'.

They indicated that curriculum pressures and demands for additional record keeping leave them with little time to support a disruptive child or to develop appropriate alternative materials for children with learning difficulties. This in turn can lead to frustration and consequent disruption among such children if they are unable to succeed in the tasks set.

Teachers set these difficulties within the context of wider social problems facing children's families, notably unemployment and poverty. They suggested that pressures faced by children in school, allied to difficulties which a number of them were experiencing out of school and young people's

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belief that schooling might not support them in finding future work, were having an impact on their motivation, even at primary level:

We are into the second generation of children whose parents have not worked. A lot of the original reasons why people toed the line are not there any longer and I think that a lot of the children in our school are living in situations where there does not seem an awful lot of point [to education].

Everyone wants to achieve in some form, but I feel at home and at school they are not seeing opportunities for themselves as individuals. Some of the traditional motivations are not there. So we've got to look at alternatives. Where we become negative it's because of tiredness, it's because of workload, it's because of the amount of curriculum we have to cover. We've lost sight of making it interesting. (Primary teacher)

Interestingly, none of the teachers suggested that the removal of corporal punishment as a possible disciplinary option had contributed to discipline problems, and ultimately to the increasing use of under-achievement as a sanction, as did a number of the teachers and parents in Hayden's (2007) study of excluded children.

Teachers' Understandings of Racial Equality

Some teachers also argued that pressures to meet the demands of the National Curriculum had led to an approach where teachers often fail to consider whether or not the content of lessons builds upon particular children's experiences and cultures. This would lead some children to feel neglected or marginalised and thus more likely to become disaffected. One teacher argued that an inappropriate curriculum was part of the solution, as

was inadequate teacher training, but felt that teacher expectations played a central role:

The over-representation of African-Caribbean boys (among those excluded) is a very complicated issue. However, I think expectations make a big difference, and I think we do tend, however well intentioned, to see a black boy and think they are going to be trouble. A lot of this is down to the media and how they over emphasise issues about black boys, the society in general as well as other research findings.

I think that one of the problems is that after a long period of dependency (on National Curriculum requirements) and considering new teachers now, there is a whole generation of teachers who are sent into schools without the grounding of making decisions about what is appropriate for example SEN issues in the class (experience from supply teaching)

These teachers comments about a generation of teachers being inadequately prepared to make decisions about appropriate curriculum content within the context of a culturally diverse classroom was supported by a number of newly qualified teachers. Such teachers reported that they wished to develop multicultural approaches but lacked training in this area and were unaware as to where they might find suitable materials.

(Birmingham report 2004)

Head teachers generally showed themselves to be more aware of issues relating to cultural diversity and racial equality than class teachers. Parffrey (2004) points out that schools in Canada and the USA do not exclude

children since schooling is recognised as the means by which children realise their basic human right to education.

According to research studies on teachers understating of racial equality none of the teachers or head teachers interviewed in the case study schools supported the abolition of permanent under-achievement, although all heads saw it as a last resort. A number characterised it as a failure on the part of the school: ‘I would say permanent under-achievement is a defeat’ (secondary head teacher).

Some head teachers recalled their personal sense of failure and distress as they recounted the experience of permanently excluding a pupil.

Nevertheless, all the head teachers, including the two primary heads—one of whom had never excluded and the other who had excluded only two pupils in 20 years as head teacher—advocated retaining permanent under-achievement as an ultimate sanction:

Behaviour Policies

Most school had developed its own system of rewards and sanctions which were generally explicit in the behavioural code. The aim is to provide a structure of support for difficult pupils, with a system of rewards and a full range of lesser sanctions so that permanent under-achievement was, where possible, avoided:

There is some evidence (for example, Holland & Hamerton, 2004) that even within schools there can be inconsistency in the types of offence for which pupils are, and are not, excluded. Such inconsistency might, in certain circumstances, allow sanctions to be applied in a discriminatory way.

However, it could be argued that policies listing particular offences as leading to under-achievement should be avoided, as they could place heads in the position of having to exclude a pupil when mitigating circumstances might make under-achievement inappropriate.

While this might mean treating the same offence differently when committed by different pupils or groups of pupils, it could also reduce the rate of under-achievement. It is essential that clear explanations of school policy are made to both pupils and parents, so they can see the justice of a school's approach.

In some cases of under-achievement from school, teacher inexperience or lack of skills or training in managing difficult pupil behaviour may play a part (OFSTED, 2006a). A lot of the behavioural problems that exist, and I do not think there are many, are due to the fact that the whole staff have not got together to go over the approach to aspects of misbehaviour in real depth.

So what I think is happening for example, if a member of staff does something inappropriate-this is not criticise a kid gets into the situation where the school has to send them home. But I think if we could change the approach in the classroom more, this would happen less. At the moment we have to react to situations and also we are trying to send a message to the students about the standards that are required of them.

Pastoral Care and Mentoring

In a case study of schools, (Birmingham city council 2004) particularly in the secondary schools, they felt that school discipline was directly related to the

degree of respect which was shown to them by teachers and also to the level of support they received from teachers.

A number stressed the importance of giving pupils occasional opportunities for individual tutorials with a teacher at which they might raise personal or academic concerns. Effective pastoral care systems were also highlighted by a number of head teachers as contributing to good discipline and self-discipline among pupils. At some schools the behaviour policy was incorporated within the school's pastoral policy:

Managing difficult behaviour and developing discipline is to do with the whole school ethos. We are in the business of caring and supporting; therefore we do whatever we can. We are in the business of being fair. Another thing looked at was how to reinforce positive behaviour. (Head teacher, secondary school)

Some schools had worked hard to ensure that their Personal and Social Education curriculum allowed all pupils to reflect on issues of their personal conduct. For example, some had introduced a mentoring programme for pupils who were presenting problems or who were disaffected.

In one secondary school, a group of African-Caribbean boys who had been regularly in trouble and were perceived as vulnerable to under-achievement were being informally mentored by the (white male) head teacher. On the other hand, an African-Caribbean man could be invited to lead weekly sessions with African-Caribbean boys.

Another aim was to raise self-esteem, and we bring in consultants to work with the pupils on half-day conferences, to get them thinking about ‘ Where do I want to be in three or four or five years time?’. (Head teacher, Birmingham school)

Equal Opportunities Policy and Practice

One explanation for the over-representation of African-Caribbean pupils within the under-achievement statistics is racism. The suggestion is not that most teachers operate in overly racist ways but that deep-seated stereotypes held by teachers and school governors may lead to black children being seen as having behavioural difficulties.

Bridges (2004) suggests that with additional pressures on black families from high levels of unemployment, cuts in social spending, racial harassment and ‘ social dislocation imposed on their family and community life ... it is hardly surprising that some black children present themselves as “ aggressive” in school, as this is a stance that society outside has taught them is necessary for survival’.

Stifling (2003), in her research into the causes of under-achievement , found that race often featured as a background issue and that although schools think they treat all their pupils the same and do not exclude black pupils unfairly, they do not take into account the factors which have caused the unacceptable behaviour, particularly racial harassment by other pupils.

She concludes: ‘ Throughout the course of my research I have found evidence of open racism demonstrated by staff in schools to be uncommon. Far more common is the racial harassment of a black child by a white peer

group'. A government-commissioned study to establish why some schools appear more effective in managing pupil behaviour and avoiding under-achievement also highlighted racism, in the area if not in the school, as one of the problems likely to be experienced by excluded pupils (OFSTED, 2006a).

Community and Support Services

Previous research has suggested that in many cases of under-achievement, support from outside the school has been lacking, while the support provided within school has been to help the teacher cope, rather than to help pupils overcome their problems (Abbotts & Parsons, 2003). A case study schools drew on a wide range of outside support agencies, including voluntary agencies, independent consultants and LEA support services. However, they noted that resources for LEA services were often limited and that they may not always be available for all pupils who need them.

One community-based initiative which has been welcomed by a number of Birmingham schools is the KWESI project (Klein, 2006), a mentoring project run by black men which targets black boys judged to be vulnerable to under-achievement. The mentors enter into a partnership with schools to support individual children and KWESI asks its volunteers and participating schools to adopt a 'no blame' approach, so that both parties work for the best interests of the child.

Although none of the case study schools was working directly with KWESI, evidence suggests that the scheme has been influential beyond the schools where volunteers are working. It has made head teachers aware of the need

to address the disproportionate under-achievement of African-Caribbean boys and may have contributed to a change in the climate of opinion.

The Role of the LEA

There is a clear role for LEAs in providing feedback to schools on the patterns and trends in exclusions and the impact on under-achievement. Monitoring of exclusions varied considerably among schools. Some head teachers, for example, did not have the data to discuss numbers of fixed term exclusions in relation to permanent exclusions nor any evidence as to whether fixed term exclusions helped to prevent permanent exclusions.

The desirability of recording and monitoring action taken to support vulnerable pupils was also stressed by a number of schools. Birmingham LEA currently provides support for schools' own monitoring by analysing their records to highlight any patterns in under-achievement by ethnic group and sex.

A school wishing to monitor under-achievement thoroughly would need to collect and analyse data for both fixed term and permanent exclusions by sex, ethnic group, special educational needs, socio-economic background (for example, by entitlement to free school meals) and year group. Schools can record additional data which might indicate a need for changes in practice or school policies; for example, noting the pupil's and teachers who are involved in incidents leading to under-achievement. LEAs might provide guidance in such matters and put schools in touch with schools in similar circumstances who have found solutions to particular difficulties.

Head teachers of schools with low under-achievement rates often feel penalised if they are asked to accept pupils excluded from other schools. Head teachers also suggested that the LEA might impose a ceiling on the number of previously excluded pupils a school should be expected to take within a given period, thus protecting the support and resources available for difficult pupils within any one school.

According to a research a school had received a small grant from the LEA to assist with the integration of excluded pupils. Although the head argued the money had not stretched far, this was seen as a gesture of goodwill. Such funds can support an induction programme which might include additional supervision and support from outside agencies. Other support for reintegration might include allocation of a special teacher-tutor and the development of a peer group mentoring scheme.

Within LEAs there is also a need for greater collaboration between those who address the needs of vulnerable children and curriculum and advisory services which have particular expertise regarding equal opportunities and race equality issues. In many LEAs responsibility for under-achievements rests with an individual or service responsible for special educational needs; in such a situation questions of structural or unintended racism or possible racial discrimination are likely to have low priority if they are on the agenda at all.

The West Midlands Under-achievement Forum, set up to bring together representatives from nine LEAs to share expertise and develop policies and strategies to minimise school under-achievement, is a good example of inter-

LEA co-operation. It is not just at the level of policy development that such co-operation is important. For children living in one area but attending school in a neighbouring LEA there are sometimes difficulties in the co-ordinated provision of services.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Research Method

For this study I have utilised the qualitative research approach. Qualitative research is much more subjective than quantitative research and uses very different methods of collecting information, mainly individual, in-depth interviews and focus groups. However, since this research study is a secondary qualitative research the data that has been collected for qualitative analysis has been through an extensive review of literature that has been published in the field in the past few years.

Secondary research is often less costly than surveys and is extremely effective in acquiring information about peoples' communication needs and their responses to and views about specific communication. It is often the method of choice in instances where quantitative measurement is not required.

For the purpose of this project the qualitative interview is the perfect approach to take using semi structured interviews. Quantitative research involves counting and measuring of events and performing the statistical analysis of a numerical data (Smith, 1988). The assumption behind this is that there is an objective truth existing that can be measured and explained significantly. The main concerns of the quantitative approach are that, their

measurement is reliable, valid and generalisable in its clear prediction of cause and effect (Cassell and Symon, 1994).

Primary Data – was collected first through interviews. Merriam (1994) said that; Interviews are the best form of collecting evidence if the researcher wants to find out facts that cannot be observed. The student used semi-structured int