

Multiculturalism and teacher education: Tackling the underperformance of children of African descent

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Children of African Descent in a multicultural society: The British case

Britain has been a multicultural country for over 50 years ever since ethnic minorities came to work from the former colonies of the Caribbean and Asia in 1950s. The minority ethnic Census groups in Britain are Black Caribbean, Black African, Black other, Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi. They account for around 80 per cent of Britain's minority ethnic population, which together make up 7% of the UK population. However with continued racial unrest among the third and fourth generation children of migrants it is claimed that minorities live 'parallel lives' and that multiculturalism in Britain has been a 'failed project'.

One of the markers of the lack of 'multicultural success' has been the considerable differences in educational attainment between different ethnic groups. Not all ethnic groups have shared equally in the overall improvements in attainment at the five A*-C benchmark level at GCSE (General certificate of Education taken at 16 years). Black African and African Caribbean pupils (male and female) are markedly less likely to attain five higher grade GCSEs than their White and Indian peers nationally. Research has shown that while school quality (as measured by class size, teachers qualifications, school type, resources, leadership etc) and improving school effectiveness has been significant, gaps in achievement remains endemic, especially among pupils of African descent. The gap is also particularly striking between black African and Caribbean pupils from higher socio economic groups and peers of the same social class in different ethnic groups. For them ethnic inequalities persist even when class differences are taken into account.

Black 'underachievement': The debate on differences in attainment

The term 'underachievement' is often used in evaluations of differences in attainment and there has been confusion about the meaning of the term. It is often assumed, for example, that the reason for 'underachievement' must lie with the pupils and/or their families rather than the quality of the education system itself. It has also been argued that the notion of 'underachievement' undermines ethnic minority efforts to succeed and desire to do well, masking their true achievements and alternative educational practice and 'other cultural ways of knowing, learning and teaching'. The notion of 'underachievement' which began life as a useful concept, meant to identify inequality of opportunity, has become a stereotype that labels black African and Caribbean pupils, particularly the boys. My research on African Caribbean girls shows there is also a self-fulfilling prophecy of low expectations among teachers in the staff room which defines all African Caribbean pupils.

Differences in average achievement between racial, gendered or social groups raise cause for concern but do not, in themselves, prove anything about the potential of those groups. The reasons for such relative 'underachievement' are multiple but patterns of inequality are not fixed. For example, black African and Caribbean pupils may be ranked poorly in national measures of achievement (such as the proportion attaining five higher grades (A*-Cs) in their GCSE examinations), but the same group can be doing relatively well in some schools, demonstrating the importance of school effectiveness and its impact on equality of opportunity. These micro local differences can be lost in macro regional and national evaluations of pupils abilities.

Teacher expectations: A case for teacher training

Research in both the United States and Britain overwhelmingly concludes that black African and Caribbean pupils are likely to be over-represented in lower-ranked teaching groups, for example, where schools adopt 'setting by ability' or other forms of selective grouping. Research has also documented how these processes are significantly influenced by subjective teacher expectations, which tend to be markedly lower for these groups of pupils. The pupils' subsequent placement in lower ranked teaching groups, in both primary and secondary schools, institutionalises these differences and can create additional barriers to achievement. Even in schools that do not embrace setting, some form of selection is increasingly common. The structure of the GCSE examination itself now requires most subject areas to enter pupils for one of two different 'tiers' of exam, where the highest grades are only available to pupils in the top tier. African and Caribbean pupil's disproportionate concentration in low ability sets can be mapped by tracing the process of selection and assessment inside schools. This practice of selection *within* schools is especially apparent in competitive neoliberal education systems driven by league tables and 'high stakes testing' in the context of parental 'choice' and market principles.

Teacher education: Diversity and inclusion initiatives

Research on multicultural education in Britain identifies several key areas which are essential to successfully achieve educational equality for children of African and African Caribbean descent, these are:

- Multicultural and anti-racist teacher training
- Developing inclusive classroom pedagogy with culturally relevant curricula
- Enhancing School Leadership programmes for equality and diversity

Here are three initiatives that merit attention:

1 *Teacher education for inclusion*

The Government survey (2012) shows 60% of newly qualified teachers in UK feel inadequately prepared to teach diverse groups of pupils. Often they only have one or two hours on their teacher training courses on the issues of diversity. My research on teacher educators raised key issues of concern such as 'How do you tackle cultural faith-based and familial tensions without being racist or patronising?' Some tutors felt multiculturalism, which aims to be inclusive and accommodate different cultures and religions, can conflict with quality education and their aims of supporting students to achieve their potential. Others felt life episodes such as looking after sick parents and children can affect everyone in the same (colour-blind) way regardless of ethnicity. They wanted more open dialogue in their teacher training institutions about tackling issues of racism at a personal and professional level if they were to be effective in supporting black African, Caribbean and minority ethnic students through their programmes of learning.

2. *Aiming High project: Raising the Achievement of African Caribbean Pupils*, This was a national strategy geared towards raising the achievement of African Caribbean students who are seen as persistently underachieving. The programme was a pilot (2005) and focused on only a few select schools. It promoted an holistic 'whole school' approach advocating the transformation of the school ethos so all staff and students valued diversity through high expectations. The programme established the importance of constant analysis and monitoring of data on ethnic minority achievement so problems areas could be identified and dealt with immediately. It had a positive outcome as it officially pinpointed the need for continuing professional development and awareness-raising for teaching staff around issues relating to race equality, diversity, inclusion and raising achievement

3. *Community education for black African and Caribbean children*

Inclusive educational strategies that are based on communities of learning have organically grown up since 1950s in the heartlands of minority ethnic enclaves in the inner cities of Britain. Saturday or Supplementary schools are set up by the community to 'supplement' the education system in which they are failing. They are autonomous, getting little or no state funding. These are grassroots schools with pupil centred learning and teachers as agents of social transformation. These schools present the paradox radical separate provision operating as a mechanism for mainstream educational inclusion. The schools work to 'fit in' and build a dialogue with the mainstream schools and the national curriculum. However they are also radical and have developed a radical pedagogy that centres on black African and Caribbean history and knowledge.

Recommendations:

The Durban Declaration and Programme of Action (DDPA) adopted at the 2001 World Conference against Racism (WCAR) in Durban, South Africa, is a comprehensive, action-oriented document that proposes concrete measures to combat racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. It is holistic in its vision, addresses a wide range of issues, and contains far-reaching recommendations and practical measures. This paper addresses the following recommendations:

1. The DDPA emphasizes the importance of preventive and concerted action, especially in the field of education and awareness-raising, and calls for the strengthening of human rights education – **This could be achieved by developing truly inclusive classroom pedagogy for all with culturally relevant curricula that celebrates the history and contribution of people of African descent.**
2. The DDPA calls for comprehensive national action plans to eradicate racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. It calls for the reinforcement of national institutions and it formulates concrete recommendations in the areas of national legislation and the administration of justice – **This could be achieved by instituting compulsory multicultural and anti-racist teacher training programmes at a national level.**
3. The DDPA outlines measures to address discrimination in the fields of employment, health, policing, and education. It calls on States to adopt policies and programmes to counter incitement to racial hatred in the media, including on the Internet. It calls for the collection of disaggregated data, as well as additional research, as the basis for targeted actions- **This could be achieved by national systematic monitoring and evaluation of the inequitable effects of racism and discrimination on the educational progress of children of African descent with consideration of the intersectional effects of social class, gender, religion and geography.**
4. The DDPA urges States to adopt measures of affirmative or positive action to create equal opportunities for victims of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance in the political, economic, social and cultural decision-making spheres. **This could be achieved by enhancing the recruitment and inclusion of people of African descent into school leadership and for school leadership programmes to include equality and diversity training for all.**

