

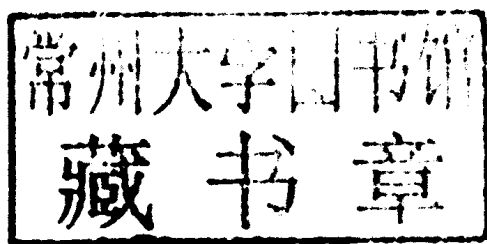
PERSPECTIVES
on the
EDUCATIONAL
EXPERIENCES
of
AFRICAN/CARIBBEAN
BOYS

By
Dr NISHEET GOSAI

Perspectives on the Educational Experiences of African/Caribbean Boys

By

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**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

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by Nisheet Gosai

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I would like to dedicate this thesis to my deity Amba, Sai baba, my parents, sister, my supervisor and to all those participants who participated in my research study.

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INTRODUCTION

ESTABLISHING A RESEARCH AREA OF INTEREST

The researcher, while being born in England, moved at an early age to India and then returned to England in 1988 and entered into the London school system as a primary school student. He had previously only experienced school life in India and soon came to realize the differences that existed. Some of the teachers were very friendly and helpful and others were at times unpleasant. Even at the age of eight the researcher could differentiate the indifference felt towards him. For example, in a classroom setting one of the teachers generally ignored him but gave her attention to other students; however she became effusive in her interest in him when other visitors came into the school. This particular experience has remained embedded in the researcher's mind. Over the years the researcher has been taught by teachers of many ethnic backgrounds but has never perceived any of them as being racist.

The researcher's interest in Black cultural issues began during his A' Levels, when he realized that many of his Black classmates from year 11 were no longer present at his sixth form college. The teachers explained to him that many Black students did not attend A' Level courses because either they had found jobs or college courses. It struck him at the time that there was something slightly odd about this explanation.

When the researcher was at university he discovered the subject of Educational Studies. This discipline allowed close investigation of the way ethnicity could influence societal organisation. This meant he could study Black ethnicity in a sociological and educational context. The researcher also became aware of media representations of young Black males as a 'problematic demographic'. For example, *The Times Educational Supplement* reported Ofsted's (1999) concern over a number of years with the negative progress of Black males in school. The researcher's own experience of his Black male peers at school and such reports helped to create a research

interest in the issue. Hallam and Rhamie (2003) in 'The Influence of Home, School and Community on African-Caribbean Academic Success in the United Kingdom' point to the persistent issue of African/Caribbean underachievement:

Since the 1960s Afro-Caribbean children have been labelled and identified as underachievers (see Taylor; 1981, Tomlinson; 1983). Research in the 1980s and 1990s reflected earlier findings with pupils' continuing to make less progress on average than other pupils' (Maughan et al; 1985, Mortimore et al; 1988, Drew and Gray; 1991, Plewis and Veltman; 1994, Gillborn and Gipps; 1996, Ofsted; 1999, Strand; 1999) (Hallam and Rhamie, 2003, p101).

It was interesting for the researcher to note that more recent publications such as the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) *Ethnicity and Education. The Evidence on Minority Ethnic Pupils' aged 5-16* (2006) continued to identify the trend reported by Hallam and Rhamie that African/Caribbean boys were amongst the lowest GCSE achievers. Similarly, the London Development Agency Report (LDA), *The educational experiences and achievements of Black boys in London schools, 2000-2003* commissioned by the then London Mayor, Ken Livingstone, reaffirmed that the underachievement of Black boys was a continuing issue. The persistent nature of this problem has inspired the researcher to conduct a research study on the issues involved, but remembering his own experiences of schooling, he wanted to ensure that the Black boys themselves were able to tell their own story.

Aim of the study

The aim of this study then is to investigate the experiences affecting the success and failure of Black males in English state secondary schools. It is concerned primarily with Black boys since they have been identified as one of the social groups having highly negative experiences within mainstream secondary educational institutions (Sewell, 1997; Blair, 2001; Tomlinson, 2008). For example, there is research, which suggested that the authority structure in secondary schools contributed to Black boys developing an anti-school stance, which impacted in a negative way on their educational achievement (Mac an Ghaill, 1988; 2003; Sewell, 1997; Blair, 2001). Similarly, Department of Employment statistics pointed to Black Caribbean boys (and others of Black origin) having had the highest rates of exclusion from state maintained schools (See:

www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SBU/b000209/980-s3.htm and

www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SBU/b000209/980-anx.htm).

The study is situated within the context of two fields of educational research. The first has focussed upon secondary schooling and Black male pupils (Mac an Ghaill, 1988; 2003; Gillborn, 1995; 2008; Sewell, 1997; Blair, 2001; LDA 2003). The second field of inquiry has explored Black educational organizations (Reay and Mirza, 1997). Alongside the research in a secondary school, this study will also use comparative research findings from two 'non-school' institutions, a supplementary school and a youth organization in order to gain additional data about Black boys' experiences of secondary school. Alongside the often negative experiences of secondary school reported by the first field of inquiry, the second field offers the possibility of examining more positive engagement with and response to Black educators/youth workers in the 'non-school' sites. The study is particularly concerned with probing the reasons as to why these institutions were successful in making Black boys' educational experiences more meaningful and the implications of this for secondary schooling. It is further hoped that this comparative approach will highlight the specific impact of mainstream secondary schooling on Black boys and their responses, in relation to research findings on other social groups, for example, white working class boys, Black girls and other ethnic minority groups, who it is reported have negative experiences of schooling and low achievement. The specificity of contemporary Black boys' experiences of school life should be further enabled by the researcher's framing of the study in drawing upon key social and educational concepts-culture, identity and identity formations; masculinities; Black culture and racial stereotyping. These concepts are derived from the literature which has addressed the issue of Black underachievement in schools. Some of these concepts are contested and this will be explored in the literature review.

Methods

The study adopts a multidisciplinary approach to gather original data. In order to investigate Black boys' schooling and their own accounts of their experiences both fairly and accurately, the data presented in this study are drawn from a large number of interviews: with Black boys, Black, Asian and White teachers, youth workers and Black parents. Over a course of six months, 36 participants were involved in this research study. The study used a wide range of methods, including semi-structured interviews, participant-observation and non-participant-observation (Bouma, 2000; Brewer, 2000). This personal interaction was carried out in the best social

scientific way possible (Silverman, 2001; Mc Namee, 2002; Ritchie et al, 2003). Alternative data gathering approaches, such as questionnaires or other statistical information were considered, but it was felt by the researcher that they were not appropriate to generate material that is primarily concerned with research participants' meanings of their social lives. As Thomas (1996, p.770) points out, qualitative methods enable the researcher to investigate, meaning, human value, social processes and the perceptions and traditions of social groups. Reading through the data presented in this study, the researcher feels that it is representative of these boys' descriptions and explanations of their educational lives. Further, because the researcher wanted to engage with and understand the educational experiences of Black boys through their 'eyes'/'voices' he decided that it would be useful to look beyond the school gate at other sites of education and learning. He decided therefore, to talk with and observe Black boys not only in a secondary school setting, but also in the setting of a supplementary school and a youth club. The latter was a site of informal learning. By opening out the scope for research fieldwork, the researcher hoped to capture different dimensions of the boys' experiences and to see if their perceptions on education were consistent or different according to location.

Terminology

For the purposes of this study the ethnic group referred to as African/Caribbean were people who had a Black African or Caribbean ancestry only. In terms of the British census and various educational statistics this was a demographic group, an ethnic group and not a race. The term racism in this study refers to systematic discrimination both within the structures of the institution of schooling and interaction between individuals based on negative perception of assumed racial characteristics (see Gillborn, 1990; 2008; Mac an Ghaill, 1999; Taylor et al, 2009 for discussion of contemporary racism).

Outline of the study

The study is divided into seven chapters. Chapter One offers a review of the research literature, focusing upon the experiences and achievement of African/Caribbean boys in English state maintained schools. The second chapter provides a discussion of the rationale behind the chosen research methodology, emphasising the developmental aspects of refining the topics of research conversation. Chapter three is short, but important as it

points to difficulties encountered in translating the proposed data gathering methods into practice. The next three chapters report and analyse the data gathered in the three sites of learning - the secondary school, the supplementary school and the youth organisation. The final chapter outlines conclusions, makes recommendations for further research and offers suggestions for ways forward in the area of Black male education.

CHAPTER ONE

LITERATURE REVIEW: RESEARCH ON THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN/CARIBBEAN BOYS

Introduction

The research focus for this study is “*Perspectives on the educational experiences of African/Caribbean boys.*” African/Caribbean boys’ achievement and their experience in education is the main subject of this review. A 2006 Department for Education and Skills (DFES) report on ethnicity and education showed that Black Caribbean boys had the lowest attainment at GCSE of all ethnic groups who were regular school attendees. The problem of attainment at secondary school for African/Caribbean boys has been recorded consistently since the 1970s. Recent statistical evidence from the Education and Skills 2006 report will be included to provide current information on the continuing trend of school attainment amongst Black pupils.

A common theme in the research literature, including earlier work such as Bernard Coard’s (1971) study of how the British education system failed Black boys or the government sponsored Rampton Report (1981), which recognised the existence of racism in the British education system, and the more recent work of Maud Blair (2001), is that a high proportion of Black boys find their educational experience to be negative. In this study the researcher refers to African/Caribbean boys as the ‘problematic demographic’. This is because the literature emphasizes the problems they encounter and the lack of interventions and other educational strategies to help them achieve success. In response to the schooling of Black boys over the last few decades there have been in the literature diverse explanations and emphases of what is to be done. For example, in a study commissioned by the London Development Agency, *The educational experiences and achievements of Black boys in London schools 2000-2003*, the authors of the report called for an increase in the proportion of Black Minority Ethnic teachers within the educational system, particularly

Black teachers, because there was evidence that suggested the latter had better relations with Black boys than White teachers did (see pages 11 and 15 of the recommendation section, recommendation number 32, see also Virk, 1998). Youdell (2004) provides a different focus, exploring the racialisation of London-based Black male pupils, in which she critically discusses the tension between learner identities and sub-cultural identities. Importantly, government reports especially from Ofsted have stated that Black boys in primary school achieved close to the average on entry to secondary school but by the end of year eleven they became amongst the lowest achievers (Ofsted, 1999). This was a primary reason that this review and the work presented in the study concentrates on older African/Caribbean students at secondary schools.

Outline of literature review

To engage with the extensive literature on the educational experiences of Black pupils' at secondary schools, this literature review has been divided into the following sections. The first section outlines key concepts that the researcher is using to frame his understanding of Black boys' schooling experiences. The researcher begins with more general concepts from sociological and cultural studies literatures and then draws upon concepts from the educational literature. These concepts are: culture, identity and identity formations; masculinities; Black culture and racial stereotyping. The next section sets out and reflects on the question of academic achievement and British born, African Caribbean boys in schools. The researcher begins by discussing statistics from *Ethnicity and Education: The Evidence of Minority Ethnic Pupils' aged 5-16*, 2006. This leads onto an examination of current debates that simplistically compare 'Black male failure' and 'Black female success' (Mac an Ghaill, 1999; hooks, 2004). Looking at earlier work in the literature, including that from Black feminists, reveals a more complex picture. It is suggested that more recently a discourse of 'failing masculinity' has been important in influencing how educational statistics on academic achievement are explained by the media, the government and within schools. Also, it is suggested that alongside comparisons between Black males and females, it is important to look at the question of academic achievement among white pupils and other ethnic minority groups. This, then leads on to a broader discussion of the literature on Black boys and the schooling process including an examination of Black boys' responses in terms of peer group support to racism and the implementation of multi-cultural and anti-racist strategies (Nagle, 2009). In turn, the researcher explores parental and

community responses to the schooling of Black boys, within the important context of Black youth organizations and Black supplementary schools. The final section identifies key areas and issues which the literature to date generally fails to address and where this study will seek in part to address.

Theoretical perspectives: Key concepts

Culture, Identity and Identity Formations

The term culture is one of the most difficult and contested concepts in the social sciences and humanities, which is often defined against the concept of nature (Williams, 1963). While anthropologists have stressed shared values of a society, more elite definitions associate culture with traditional literature and arts of 'high culture' sociologists have developed understandings of culture as the lived 'experience of everyday life', speaking of mass culture or popular culture (Hall, 1997; Brah et al, 1999). Early social science work examined culture in relation to socialization, which was concerned with the learning of a society's norms and values. Giddens (1993, p60) describes socialization as: 'the process whereby the helpless infant gradually becomes a self-aware, knowledgeable person, skilled in the ways of the culture into which she or he is born'. The family, work, community and peer-groups have all been researched to understand processes of socialization but perhaps one of the most important formal agents of socializing young people into society's culture is education (Bowles and Gintis, 1976). The term culture became widely used during the 1970s, suggesting different meanings depending on context, including class culture, popular culture, youth culture, gender culture and multi-culture (Du Gay, 1997). During the 1970s and 1980s many researchers, for example in education, examined different cultures, including class, race and gender, to help explain institutional inequalities (Willis, 1977; Amos and Parmar, 1981; Fuller, 1984; Hammersley and Woods, 1984; see Arnot and Mac an Ghail, 2006).

More recently in the social sciences, what has been called the 'cultural turn' seems to have moved away from questions of institutional inequalities to examine cultural differences (Gilroy, 1992; Mercer, 1994). For some theorists, such as Bradley (1996), this has meant a move away from social class to explore more seriously questions of gender, race and sexuality. She welcomes the higher profile for the latter but argues for the need to bring these perspectives together. Hall, (1996, p439) provides a definition of culture with this new emphasis on language, culture,

representation and difference. He writes that: 'By culture....I mean the actual grounded terrain of practices, representations and customs of any specific society. I also mean the contradictory forms of common sense which have taken root in and helped shape popular culture'. This more recent understanding of culture has placed an emphasis on identity and meaning. One of the key questions of recent research is to examine how cultural identities are produced for individuals and communities. For example, Kath Woodward (2000) entitles her edited collection: *Questioning Identity: Gender, Class, Nation*. She places her text within current rapid global and local social, political and technological change, suggesting three important questions: how are identities formed? To what extent can we shape our own identities? and, are there particular uncertainties about identity at this moment in the UK?

Jenkins (2004), who draws on the work of Barth (1969), Tajfel (1981) and Cohen, (1994) claims that identity was one of the central themes to emerge during the 1990s, with changing and new identities high on the academic and political agenda. He notes:

Everybody has something to say: anthropologists, geographers, historians, philosophers, political scientists, psychologists, sociologists. From debates about the modernity of self identity to the postmodern and postcolonial fascination with difference, from feminist deconstructions of social conventions to urgent attempts to understand the apparent resurgence of nationalism and ethnic politics, the field is crowded (p.8).

Jenkins also argues that the term identity may be misleading in that it suggests something static. Hence, he emphasises the term identification, suggesting an active process between individuals and collectivities.

Hall, the former director of the CCCS, in the University of Birmingham, is one of the most outstanding scholars in the field providing new theoretical perspectives on how social groups form contemporary identity formations (1991, 1997). He challenges conventional sociological and psychological accounts with their emphasis on a shared historical culture and the search for an authentic true self. For Hall, in current societies, cultural identities as well as having aspects in common also have differences, including around issues of class, gender as well as ethnicity. Hence, when we look at how people produce their identity, we need to examine a range of complex processes (Mirza, 2009; Brah et al, 1999).

As pointed out earlier, there has presently in the social sciences, been a shift away from looking at class divisions to a focus on cultural differences, around identities of gender, race and sexuality (Barrett and Phillips, 1992). This has also included a move to include social groups that have tended to be less visible in research terms, often because they – whites, men, heterosexuals – were groups with power, who presented themselves as the ‘norm’ (Bonnett, 2000). In relation to these social groups, Mercer (1990, p43) argues that: ‘identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experiences of doubt and uncertainty’. This doubt and uncertainty has partly developed in response to anti-racist, feminist and gay liberation politics (Rutherford, 1990).

Masculinities

During the 1990s in Britain there was an increased visibility about men and masculinity as being gendered categories. However, as major male theorists pointed out, the key starting point of understanding masculinity has been developed by feminist scholars who strived to ensure the concept of gender was seen as of key importance in understanding the social world (Hearn and Morgan, 1990; Connell, 1995; Kimmel, 1997). Bradley (1996, p25) defines gender in the following terms: ‘Gender refers to the varied and complex arrangements between men and women, encompassing the organisation of reproduction, the sexual divisions of labour and the cultural definitions of femininity and masculinity’. She describes how earlier feminists coined the term patriarchy to illustrate that power relations were at the centre of social arrangements between men in institutions, such as the state, law, education, workplace, marriage and family life, etc (Oakley, 1972; Cockburn, 1983; Mama, 1984). A key political argument being made is that if women’s lives are to change, then men must also change. Bradley also points out that a range of different styles of feminism, including Black, lesbian and post-structuralist feminists, contested the meaning of terms like gender and patriarchy (Carby, 1982; hooks, 1984; Wittig, 1981; Butler, 1990). So, by the 1990s when there were major debates about men and masculinity, academics had a rich vocabulary to draw upon. However, as Hearn and Kimmel (2006, p53) point out: ‘Studies of men and masculinities stand in a complex relation to women’s studies and feminism’, because male theorists often fail to acknowledge the latter work.