As a black teacher in London I am horrified by the underachievement of African-Caribbean boys in secondary school, and in GCSE exams. This is happening at such an alarming rate that, according to a leading black authority, these boys are becoming a ‘new underclass’ in British society. My study in an inner London school revealed that many African-Caribbean boys do not get to sixth form to do A levels – they have not achieved the required GCSEs. They go to college or become a NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training). Very few make it to university and a good job.

The education system is failing African-Caribbean boys. Despite doing well at key stages 1 and 2, they start to fall behind on entering secondary school. The fate of most of these boys is sealed from leaving the school gates at the end of KS4. This leads to social deprivation and a one-way ticket to the streets, gang culture, crime, prison or even getting killed.

**History repeated?**

This deplorable problem has severe consequences for society and the teaching profession. It was Bernard Coard in his book *How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Subnormal in the British School System: The Scandal of the Black Child in Schools in Britain* (1971) who shamed the authorities into making changes. Bernard argued that the black child laboured under three crucial handicaps:

1. low expectations on his part about his likely performance in a white-controlled system of education
2. low motivation to succeed academically because he feels the cards are stacked against him
3. low teacher expectations, which affect the amount of effort expended on his behalf by the teacher, and also affect his own image of himself and his abilities.

Coard said: “If the system is rigged against you, and if everyone expects you to fail, the chances are you will expect to fail too.”

He classified these as systemic and institutionalised racism.

African-Caribbean boys experience some of the same problems as their counterparts who were branded educationally subnormal (ESN) nearly 40 years ago. But rather than being sent away to special schools, they remain in mainstream education.

In my study I identified three main contributors to the underachievement of African-Caribbean boys:

1. They are often sent to Learning Support Units (LSUs) and Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) because they are said to have behavioural and emotional problems.

2. Their masculinity and subculture is sometimes perceived as threatening and some teachers form negative views about them.

3. In schools with a diverse ethnic population they can become ‘hidden’.

**Teachers’ perception**

Tony Sewell, another black authority, says: “Black boys are seen as angels and devils in British and American schools and they are heroes of a street fashion culture that dominates most of our inner cities.” This is mostly to do with a general Americanised youth culture which some teachers perceive as negative, hostile, often threatening and difficult to comprehend.

The boys’ subculture or masculinity is not sufficiently understood in schools. This is a form of institutionalised racism.

The ways some teachers perceive African-Caribbean boys can affect their learning. Sewell says the experience of being the “darling of popular youth subculture and the sinner in the classroom” has led to a range of behaviours.

Often it is assumed that African-Caribbean boys have language problems, like students who need EAL teaching.
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As a result, African-Caribbean boys are more likely to be extracted from classrooms for behavioural and emotional problems than any other group. The impact is not always positive. When boys return to the classroom, their behaviour is often unchanged and they continue to underachieve in GCSEs.

In many inner London schools with a large ethnic minority population, however, African-Caribbean boys may simply become ‘hidden’. Often it is assumed they have language problems, like students who need to be taught English as an additional language (EAL). Their needs are not seen as different, and therefore are not met. Of course all African-Caribbean boys have English as their first language!

Summary

When I spoke to Coard in 2009 he saw the failure of schools to separate African-Caribbean boys from EAL children or placing them in LSUs and PRUs as systemic and institutionalised racism. In other words despite years of multiculturalism we have not moved on much.

The gap continues to widen for African-Caribbean boys in GCSE results, and government intervention under New Labour did nothing to foster their academic achievement. The new administration promises to cater for diversity in one breath and in another make billions of pounds worth of spending cuts.

The following recommendations are vital if we are going to improve the situation:

- create an inspirational curriculum to enhance diversity and celebrate all cultures
- separate classes for some lessons, focusing on supporting African-Caribbean boys in understanding the value of education and careers
- provide extra-curricular sport and other activities
- involve more African-Caribbean parents in supporting learning
- involve black businesses, and community organisations such as churches
- celebrate the successes of prominent black celebrities
- provide continuous teacher training on culture and diversity to challenge preconceived attitudes
- ensure better mentoring of these boys.

Most of all, the particular needs of African-Caribbean boys should be identified. As teachers we can make a difference to their lives and help them understand the importance of education. When they fail, we do. Our duty as professionals is to contribute to the positive development of all children.

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