

# African-Caribbean students in UK schools – an encyclopedia entry

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## Introductory note

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## Summary

Significant numbers of African-Caribbean students have been present in UK schools since the 1950s. Of those who are currently in the school system, the vast majority were born in the UK, as were the vast majority of their parents. Throughout the last 60 years the academic achievement of African-Caribbean students has been markedly lower than the national average. Recently, however, the attainment gap has been narrowing. This entry describes the concerns of parents, educators and officialdom over the years, and their conflicting understandings of causes and remedies.

## Early developments, 1948–1981

There have been people of Caribbean heritage in the UK for many centuries. The symbolic birthday of the present community, however, is 22 June 1948. On that day the troop-carrying steamship *Empire Windrush* arrived in London from the Caribbean (the 'West Indies', as the region was known officially and widely at that time) with about 490 young men who had come in response to the UK's need for labour after the Second World War. Most saw themselves as temporary migrants, not as settlers. They were joined by many others in the following years, and by wives and families. They met widespread prejudice and discrimination from the white population, but most decided to stay. It was not until the 1960s that discrimination against them began to be made unlawful.

In the course of the 1960s there was growing concern amongst parents and educators about the low levels of academic achievement of 'West Indian' children. An official report published in 1969, for example, found that children of West Indian parents were:

a source of bafflement, embarrassment and despair in the education system, and that they often presented problems which the average teacher was not equipped to understand, let alone to overcome (Rose, E. J. B. and co-authors, *Colour and Citizenship: a report on British Race Relations*, Oxford University Press 1969, p. 281).

Shortly afterwards, a seminal essay was published as a pamphlet by a young teacher in London named Bernard Coard, who had been born in Grenada. This had a major and lasting influence on the outlook and understanding of many parents and community activists, and of a growing number of teachers. Its title and sub-title were a vivid summary of its central thesis and polemical tone: 'How the West Indian child is made educationally subnormal in the British school system: the scandal of the Black child in schools in Britain'.

Towards the end of the 1970s the then secretary of state for education, Shirley Williams (later, Baroness Williams), set up an official committee of inquiry into the education of children from ethnic minority groups. This was chaired by Anthony Rampton, a businessman and philanthropist, and it produced an interim report entitled *West Indian Children in our Schools* in 1981. This was widely welcomed by parents and community activists, for it attributed principal blame for underachievement on teachers' expectations, and on routine conventions, customs and procedures in schools.

In coming to this conclusion, the committee was aware that many West Indian parents and community leaders had insisted in their evidence that the major reason for the underachievement of their children at school was racism, and its effects both in schools and in society generally. A racist, the committee said, is someone who believes that 'people of a particular race, colour or national origin are inherently inferior, so that their identity, culture, self-esteem, views and feelings are of less value than his or her own and can be disregarded or treated as less important'.

The committee said further that very few people can be said to be entirely without prejudice of one kind or another and that in Britain, due in part at least to the influence of history, such prejudices may be directed against West Indians and other non-white ethnic minority groups. A well-intentioned and apparently sympathetic person, it added, 'may as a result of their education, experiences or environment, have negative, patronising or stereotyped views about ethnic minority groups which may subconsciously affect their attitudes and behaviour'. Consequently West Indians may be seen as 'them' or 'these people' and there is a tendency to describe British-born West Indians as 'immigrants'. Such attitudes and behaviour, the committee declared, reflected what it called unintentional racism.

By the time Mr Rampton's committee reported in 1981, there had been a change of government and Shirley Williams was no longer the secretary of state for education. One of the first actions of the new government in response to the report was to dismiss Mr Rampton from his post as chairperson and replace him with someone considered to be more reliable. The report was criticised and disregarded not only by the government but also, at official levels, by the teacher unions. There followed several years during which there was no official acknowledgement nationally that raising the achievement of West Indian students required organisational, attitudinal and cultural change in schools.

There was, however, such recognition in certain local areas, notably in parts of Greater London and the West Midlands. Also, parents and community activists continued to hold the perceptions which they had held since the 1950s. They therefore continued to set up and manage supplementary schools for their children. These continued to be an invaluable base not only for direct teaching and instruction but also for campaigning and advocacy.

### **Turning point in 1999**

A turning point came in 1999, with the publication of a major document known variously as the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry report and the Macpherson Report. Stephen Lawrence was an African-Caribbean school student who was murdered in a racist attack on the streets of south London in 1993. Sir William Macpherson was a retired judge who presided over an official government inquiry into how the murder had been investigated by the Metropolitan Police Service.

The police's failure to investigate the murder efficiently, accompanied by its failure to treat Stephen's parents and family with decency and respect, was judged by Macpherson to be due to institutional racism, which he defined in terms which have since become extremely well-known:

the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin.

The report added that institutional racism can be 'seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racial stereotyping'. The report was not about education. It had clear implications for educational institutions, however, as for all other public bodies. It influenced the thinking behind the Race Relations Amendment Act 2000.

## **Black Children's Achievement Programme (BCAP), 2004–2011**

The Macpherson report of 1999 was broadly accepted by the government and the report's implications for education were broadly accepted by the teacher unions. Thus unlike the Rampton report of almost 30 years earlier it was taken seriously by officialdom and influence-leaders and led to a range of well-funded and well-planned educational projects, both nationally and locally.

The most high-profile of these projects was the Black Children's Achievement Programme (BCAP), which ran for several years in various forms, and with a range of nomenclature, between 2004 and 2011. It was developed from a series of national projects and programmes in the previous five years which had had the generic title *Aiming High*. These had been particularly concerned with the learning of English as an additional language, and with related issues, and by and large had therefore not been focused on the needs of African-Caribbean students.

The distinctive features of the programme included the following:

1. There was an explicit focus on Black children and young people, together with financial and staffing resources targeted and dedicated specifically towards them.
2. Whole-school approaches and policies were developed with the substantial involvement of senior staff – work in schools was not marginalised by being run by relatively junior staff with little or no support from senior management
3. An external consultant was attached to each participating school to act as a professional friend, providing support, ideas and advice but also, if considered necessary, criticism and challenge.
4. There was considerable flexibility, such that each school was encouraged and able to devise plans and activities tailored to its particular situation, and to its stage of development and understanding.
5. Parents and members of the local community were consulted and involved.
6. Rigorous attention was paid to monitoring and to the analysis of data.
7. There was a focus on issues of self-esteem and self-image, and on attitudes towards learning and education.
8. Attention was paid to the nature of a culturally relevant curriculum, and to the core concepts which such a curriculum should contain.
9. School-based and school-focused professional development and training programmes were provided for all staff who were involved in the project.

In addition to these nine features in each individual participating school, there were regional advisers who had responsibility for providing an additional layer of support, both for schools and for local authorities. Towards the end of the programme, in the period of 2009–2011, it was increasingly integrated with national initiatives concerned with, in particular, tackling socio-economic disadvantage.

It is reasonable to speculate that there is a causal connection between the nine features listed above and the fact that the gap between the achievement of African-Caribbean pupils and the achievement of all pupils narrowed nationally in the second half of the decade, albeit slowly. In summer 2009, 40 per cent of African-Caribbean students in England aged 16 achieved five or more higher grades in public examinations, including English and mathematics, compared with 50.7 per cent for all pupils. This is the usual criterion used in England for determining a student's level of attainment. The attainment gap of 10.7 percentage points was a decrease from 14.5 percentage points in 2006.

## **Continuing worries and concerns**

There continue, however, to be worries and concerns. Four areas of concern are as follows.

First, it is 40 years since it was first officially recognised, as mentioned above, that something urgently needs to be done about inequalities affecting African-Caribbean young people in British schools. By now there ought to be no attainment gap at all, let alone one which is narrowing only slowly. At the current rate of improvement it will still be almost 13 years before the gap has closed entirely.

Second, there is concern that structural changes being introduced in English education since 2010 may not contribute significantly to a narrowing of the gap in achievement between African-Caribbean students and all students, for there is a perception that analogous changes in the United States have not assisted African-American students.

Third, the need to narrow the gap between African-Caribbean students and all students has been de-emphasised in recent years as a consequence of the equally important need to narrow gaps related to socio-economic background. There is no reason to suppose that raising the achievement of children from low-income households will inevitably involve raising the achievement of African-Caribbean children or, more importantly, will inevitably help narrow the gap between the attainment of Black children and the attainment of all.

It is true, of course, that in the UK as throughout the world low household income is associated with low educational achievement. But there is a range of reasons why a household may have a low income, and a range of possible consequences. The reasons and consequences vary across different communities. It has long been known that colour-blind approaches to socio-economic disadvantage do not work for African-Caribbean people.

Fourth, there continues to an unresolved debate about the relevant salience of in-school and out-of-school factors. On the one hand, there are those who argue with Rampton, Coard and Macpherson (see above) that in-school factors are the most important influences affecting the under-achievement of African-Caribbean students. People with this view emphasise the powerful impact of low teacher expectations and of institutional racism. The principal opposing view refers to the influence of Black street culture and the norms of adolescent males, and also to the influence of what it claims are dysfunctional families. A synthesis of these conflicting views may be possible, but seems at present a distant prospect.

## **Implications for other countries**

The continuing debate in the UK relating to the under-achievement of African-Caribbean over the last 60 years has been about the relative importance of in-school and out-of-school factors. Those who emphasise in-school factors, and therefore the power of teachers' collective expectations and of institutionalised prejudice, maintain that their opponents are operating with a deficit model of African-Caribbean students, and of their parents, families and communities. Those who hold an alternative view refer in particular to the harmful effects of Black youth culture. There is an analogous debate in very many other countries.

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## Further reading

Blair, Maud (2001) *Why Pick On Me? – school exclusion and Black youth*, Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books

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John, Gus (2006) *Taking a Stand: education, race, social action and social unrest*, Manchester: Gus John Publications

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Rahmie, J. (2007) *Eagles Who Soar: how Black learners find the path to success*, Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books

Rampton, Anthony chairperson (1981) *West Indian Children in Our Schools*, London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office

Sewell, Tony (2009) *Generating Genius*, Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books