

Narrowing the Gaps and Black Achievement: a journey of improvement

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Introduction

Where are we coming from? What are we? Where are we going?

As we review and celebrate here today the journey undertaken by the Black Achievement programmes over the last few years, we ask and explore these three questions. In French, the questions were posed by Paul Gauguin in the title of one of his most famous paintings: *D’ou Venons Nous – Que Sommes Nous – Où Allons Nous*. Towards the end of this opening lecture at today’s conference we shall look at Gauguin’s painting as a way of focusing and strengthening our resolve for the next stage and next stages of the journey. Before then the lecture will be asking, in relation to the Black Achievement programmes, questions such as the following:

- In what particular ways has the journey been an improvement?
- What problems has the journey successfully overcome and what dangers has it successfully avoided?
- Are there respects in which it has not been as successful as it could and should have been?
- How confident are we that the journey of improvement is going to continue?
- To increase our confidence that the improvement will continue, what do we need to be talking and thinking about?

The lecture will:

- itemise briefly the successes of the programme
- mention there’s a danger the successes will not be sustained
- argue it is therefore as important as it ever was to think and talk about teachers’ expectations, about young people’s careers from early years to young adulthood, about the teaching of history, about racism, and about class
- speak with hope but also a tinge of unease and foreboding about the likely effects of Equality Act 2010.

Before continuing, I’d like to thank and salute, on behalf of everyone here, the team that has organised this conference, and that has led the primary and secondary Black Achievement programmes over the last few years – Eileen, Judy, Liz, Lynne, Mitch, Pauline and Sharon. I calculate that contained in this room this morning there are about two thousand years of professional experience of working on issues of Black achievement. It is a great honour to be here.

Progress and successes

First, then, the successes of the programmes. Forty years ago E J B Rose (‘Jim’ Rose, one of the founders of the Runnymede Trust) and his co-authors reported in their magisterial *Colour and Citizenship* that ‘children of West Indian parents ... have been a source of bafflement, embarrassment and despair in the education system... They have often presented problems which the average teacher is not equipped to understand, let alone overcome.’¹ The Black Achievement projects could not have been created, and this conference celebrating them could not have been organised, if embarrassment, bafflement

and despair were still widespread in 2010. The distinctive and valuable features of the journey we celebrate today include, I suggest:

- a) the explicit focus on Black pupils
- b) the greater awareness of issues affecting Black pupils throughout the education system
- c) the emphasis on whole-school approaches and, therefore, on the involvement of headteachers, governors and senior leadership teams
- d) the emphasis on reducing inequalities and therefore on creating greater equality of outcome, as distinct from only (yes, only) providing equality of opportunity
- e) the incorporation of ethnicity equality issues within the larger context and programme of narrowing gaps more generally, for example – and especially – the narrowing of gaps connected with social class, deprivation and socio-economic inequality.

There is hopefully a connection between these five points on the one hand and the fact that the gap between the achievement of African-Caribbean pupils and the achievement of all pupils has been closing, albeit slowly. In summer 2009, 40 per cent of African-Caribbean pupils achieved five or more A*-C grade GCSEs or equivalent including English and mathematics, compared with 50.7 for all pupils. The attainment gap of 10.7 was a decrease from 14.5 percentage points in 2006.²

We can take a legitimate pleasure and pride in this narrowing of the gap, and it is reasonable to claim, as does an official publication issued earlier this year, that the Black Achievement projects have led to life-changing differences for many lack children and young people, and have demonstrated that raising their attainment is possible.³ We do not meet here today beset with embarrassment, bafflement and despair. However, there are reasons to be worried that the journey of improvement may not continue. They include the following.

1. 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.
2. We cannot be confident that changes currently being introduced in education in England will contribute to a narrowing of the gap in achievement between Black pupils and all pupils. Analogous changes in the United States have not assisted African-American students.⁴ Speaking about the Academies Bill in the House of Lords on 7 June, Baroness Howells recalled the successes and progress of recent years in raising the achievement of African-Caribbean pupils. 'We are now at a point,' she said, 'where black children, given the support suited to their needs, can and do succeed.' She then added: 'However, many parents now feel that the battle almost won is about to recreate itself in what this Bill suggests and there is a fear that the struggle will begin again.'
3. Amongst our colleagues in schools and local authorities there appears to be a sense, in relation to issues affecting Black pupils, of 'been there, done that'. For a range of reasons and in a range of ways, the need to narrow the gap between Black pupils and all pupils has been de-emphasised as a concomitant of the equally important need to narrow gaps related to socio-economic background.⁵ There is absolutely no reason to suppose that raising the achievement of children eligible for free school meals will inevitably involve raising the achievement of Black children or, more importantly, will inevitably help narrow the gap between the attainment of Black children and the attainment of all children. A low household income is associated with low educational achievement, yes of course. 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 Black people.

Revisiting and re-affirming a great poem

James Berry's great poem *Dreaming Black Boy* was written almost 30 years ago and is no doubt well-known to many people at today's conference. But it is still a moving and succinct articulation of the issues with which we are concerned here today, and is worth revisiting yet again. On a single page it evokes centuries of world history, the life-story of one unique individual human being, the particularity of a classroom in modern Britain, and the interaction within that particularity of the roles of teacher and pupil. There are dreams here ('I wish...') and there's an underlying nightmare ('I could suffer/I could suffer a big big lot.')

The first wish in the poem is utterly simple: 'I wish my teacher's eyes wouldn't go past me today.' The meaning is both literal and metaphorical. Literally, the boy wants to feel that he is noticed, that his presence is taken account of. Metaphorically, and even more importantly, he wants his identity and his story to be recognised. Both literally and metaphorically he so longs not to be, in Ralph Ellison's famous phrase, an invisible man.⁶ It follows that when he does something praiseworthy – when he achieves some worthwhile target – he wants this to be noticed too, and affirmed: 'I wish he'd know it's okay to hug me when I kick a goal.' It is not empty or ritualistic praise he's asking for, not sweet nothings, but something focused, genuine and spontaneous, and in relation to real achievement. 'Hug' is here a metaphor, but it's interesting to note that a recent book on Black achievement refers to the significance of literal hugs.⁷

Berry stresses that attention and respect are expressed and received (and sometimes of course not expressed, not received) in a range of ways, not by words alone. Tone of voice, facial expression, gesture, posture, demeanour, closeness or distance, the arrangement of objects and furniture, all these affect the messages which human beings give and send to each other, and which they receive and get. Also, there is such a thing as 'institutional body language' – messages are given and received through an organisation's customs, procedures, rules, regulations. This is true in schools as everywhere else. The point is obvious and well-known, yet needs stressing. In most of the schools represented here today much communication – both in words and in body language – is inherently and inescapably cross-cultural, cross-ethnic. For this reason alone there may be misunderstandings and crossed wires. A further complicating factor is inequality, specifically inequality caused or exacerbated by racism. It is particularly within a context of race inequality that what is heard is not necessarily what is consciously meant.

The goals, says, Berry, are an educated mind, and the capacity to take part in society. 'I wish I could be educated to the best of tune-up, and earn good money, and not sink to lick boots.' The boy wants his mind to be like a well-tuned engine or musical instrument, leading to good paper qualifications, and to a good job and to a respected place in wider society: '... earn good money, and not sink to lick boots.' He wants his contributions to society to be welcome and worthwhile, not wasted: 'I wish I could go every criss-cross way of the globe, and no powers or persons or hotel-keepers would make it a waste.' He wants to be able to say 'yes'. The contrary, to spend his life saying 'no', would be waste: 'I wish life wouldn't spend me out opposing.' He does not want, to quote the recent book on Black achievement mentioned above, to spend his future 'arm-wrestling white men'.

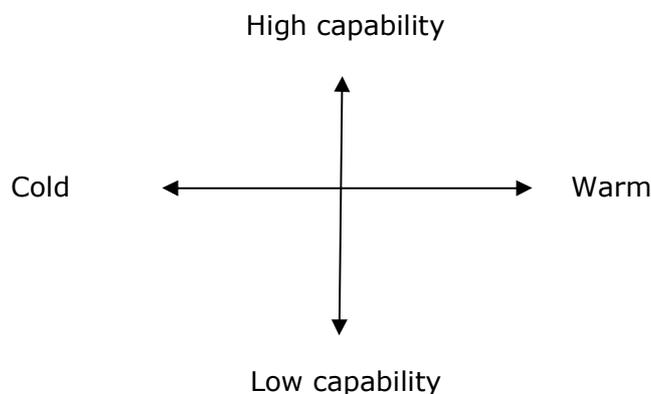
His life-affirming engagement with society is part of his engagement with the total universe: 'Wish ... creation would have me stand, stretch, hold high, my voice Paul Robeson's, my inside eye a sun.' Robeson used his voice not only to sing but also to demand justice and civil rights for his people. Berry's reference to 'my inside eye' echoes Ralph Ellison's term 'inner eye'. The boy wants to be able to render visible, and to illumine and celebrate, the stories and identities of all whom he encounters.

Teachers' expectations

Berry's boy wants, it could be said, to be seen by his teachers as wearing the IALAC badge – 'I Am Likeable and Capable'. Everyone here today knows well the concept of teachers' expectations. But like Berry's great poem, this too is a topic worth revisiting. Every young

human being wants to be seen as likeable and capable. But not all young people in British schools, all of the time, receive the message that this is how their teachers see them.

Human beings tend to classify each other, particularly at times of conflict and consequent stress and anxiety, along the continua of a) likeability and b) capability. Put the two continua at right angles to each other and you have four quadrants in the mental map with which human beings approach each other, as shown in the sketch below.



The map shows four broad kinds of expectation when human beings encounter each other.

- People perceived to belong to the top left quadrant are expected to be hostile, malevolent and troublesome. Since they also have high capability and power of various kinds they are seen as threatening.
- People perceived to belong to the bottom left quadrant are similarly expected to be hostile, malevolent and troublesome. But since they have low capability and power, and can therefore be easily contained and controlled, they are not seen as threatening.
- People perceived to belong to the bottom right quadrant are expected to be well-disposed, friendly, cooperative – in a word, 'nice'. But since they have low capability and power they are not seen as equals.
- People perceived to belong to the top right quadrant are both likeable and capable. They are sometimes known as 'PLU' – 'people like us'!

Historically, black pupils have been seen by white teachers' inner eyes as populating the unlikeable-and-incapable quadrant. The professional, ethical and human duty to adjust and correct eyesight is still with us, 40 years since Bernard Coard's seminal book and 30 years since the Rampton report. The Wanless report of 2005 said that 'left to its own devices, the system will conclude that Every Child Matters, but that Black children's failure and social exclusion is to be expected – that they matter a little bit less.' It added: 'Personalisation could empower Black pupils to fulfil their true potential, but not whilst teachers' view of the person is conditioned by subconscious prejudice.'⁸ The recent evaluation of the Black Children's Achievement Project reported that 'negative teacher attitudes/expectations and stereotypical thinking about the ability of Black children serve to undermine teacher ability to raise Black children's attainment at an individual and group level.'⁹ Work at the University of Bristol has shown that African-Caribbean pupils, amongst others, are 'systematically under-assessed' by teachers relative to their white peers.¹⁰

'Careers' from early years to young adulthood

'Where are we coming from, what are we, where are we going?' – these are questions for this whole conference in relation to the Black Achievement programmes. Slightly altered grammatically they are questions for each individual – where am I coming from, what am I, where am I going? We have to ask these questions not only about young people who do

achieve but also about those who do not. In respect of 'life-changing' experiences, young African-Caribbean men are more familiar with incarceration than with higher education.

The proportion of African-Caribbean British males aged 18–21 in prison is higher, at any one time, than at university.¹¹ To understand why someone is where they are today you need to know how they got there – what their career has been – and the critical incidents over the years when history hung in the balance. And when, therefore, an apposite action or telling word made, or could have made, a substantial difference. It's important to recall, in this respect, that young people are pulled and pushed in four directions – home, school, community, street.

A story provided with this lecture as a handout is entitled *All his short life*. It begins by describing what happens to the main character during his first encounter with the education system:

Some of the practitioners expected him to be a troublemaker. Had not the media and history books told them, or subtly suggested to them, that people like him are likely to be troublesome, even before the age of five? Was this assumption not in the very air they breathed?

Incidentally, the first draft of this story was written about 15 years ago. Is it nowadays out of date? Well, here is a Tory prospective candidate in the recent general election: 'We are represented in the media horribly ... We are shown as sexy, dangerous and exotic. We are either guilty or victims, and if we are victims it is at another black man's hand ... I despair. These portrayals make black men believe that's what they are.'¹²

The story continues with references to junior school, lower secondary and young adulthood

It slowly became clear to him, though he couldn't himself have yet voiced it like this, that he had a choice. Either he could accept the teachers' valuations of himself, as an object to be feared and controlled, or – with a sense of mounting injustice – he could resist, could assert himself, stand up for himself. He chose the latter.

Troubles and tensions mounted. Getting involved in fights and needing, he strongly believed, to prove his manhood by being hard, being bad – he must have respect from his peers, or life wouldn't be worth living.

NEET. Drifted, along with his friends, into drugs and crime. Frequently stopped by the police. Eventually, convictions and detention. I don't care, he said, whether I live or die. And I don't care whether anyone else does, either.

The teaching of history

'Too often,' said the then prime minister in 1988 in a speech to leaders of other European countries, 'the history of Europe is described as a series of interminable wars and quarrels. Yet from our perspective today surely what strikes us most is our common experience. For instance, the story of how Europeans explored and colonised and – yes, without apology – civilised much of the world is an extraordinary tale of talent, skill and courage.'¹³ There were signals shortly after the general election that this is a view of European history which finds favour with the current government and which may be incorporated into a revision of the history syllabus in English schools.¹⁴ It is timely, therefore, to cite an alternative view:

The British empire was ... an avowedly racist despotism built on ethnic cleansing, enslavement, continual wars and savage repression, land theft and merciless exploitation. Far from bringing good governance, democracy or economic progress, the empire undeveloped vast areas, executed and jailed hundreds of thousands for fighting for self-rule, ran

concentration camps, carried out medical experiments on prisoners and oversaw famines that killed tens of millions of people.¹⁵

Anyone genuinely interested in Black achievement needs to join in the forthcoming debate about the teaching of history. It will be a debate about, yes, 'tales of talent, skill and courage'. Amongst other things, we shall want to say this:

The story of how people from the Caribbean, Africa and South Asia came to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s and how, though they met foul words, spit, sticks and stones and sometimes knives on the streets; and how, though they met also genteel, patronising indifference amongst the professional and managerial classes in a wide range of institutions and organisations; and how, though many of the industries and services they came to work in collapsed due to forces of globalisation; and how, though they had to deal with perennial issues of inter-generational, male-female and intra-religious conflict in circumstances of incredible difficulty, they struggled and survived and prospered, and helped to make Britain a better place – is an extraordinary tale of talent, skill and courage.

This tale, with others, is essential as the whole nation– the 'United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland' – ponders where it is coming from, what it is, and where it is going.

Race and racisms

Old truths still need revisiting, rehearsing and reinforcing. Races do not exist, but racisms do. Colour racism/ cultural racism. Street racism/ institutional racism. Overt/subtle and explicit/coded and crude/polite. The racism of both outer and inner eyes. In our debates, conversations and deliberations on the achievement of Black pupils we must resist any notion that crude and explicit colour racism is no longer an issue. A single example will suffice here today just at the moment. At the end of last month there was an article in a national newspaper about the English Defence League. At a demonstration organised by the EDL a woman asked an under-cover reporter for a donation to support the 'heroes coming back injured from Afghanistan':

I put a pound in the bucket. 'Thanks love,' she said. 'They go over there and fight for this country and then come back to be faced with these Pakis everywhere.' She paused, before adding: 'But to be honest it is the niggers I can't stand.'¹⁶

The Equality Act 2010

A step forward or a step backward for race equality in general and for Black children and young people in particular? Hopefully, the changes will be for the better.¹⁷ There is a danger, though, that the proposed changes will prove too complicated and too onerous, and will plunge us all into painful and exhausting squabbles and competitions, and that in consequence there will be inertia in many schools and local authorities, not the substantial improvements that supporters of the new legislation hope for.

Every government department, including of course the Department for Education, still has a statutory duty to conduct a race equality impact assessment (REQUIA) in relation to every major policy it introduces, and to do so *before* the policy is put into effect. There are three essential concerns:

- to identify, and avoid or mitigate, any negative impacts on particular groups or communities
- to ensure that all groups and communities benefit equally from any positive impacts

- to take opportunities to reduce inequalities that already exist.

With these three points in mind, it is essential that the DfE should conduct rigorous REQUIAs in relation to forthcoming cuts in public expenditure directly or indirectly affecting the education system, and in relation to measures such as academies and pupil premiums.¹⁸ It is in addition essential that REQUIAs should be in the public domain so that all interested parties can see – and, if they wish, critique and challenge – the evidence and assumptions on which assessments are based. In this connection every citizen, including for example everyone present at this conference, has a right through the Freedom of Information Act to examine every REQUIA that the DfE conducts.

Closing remarks

The title of one of Paul Gauguin's most famous paintings captures the subject-matter, at several different levels, of the opening lecture at today's conference: Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going? Whether the journey we're all on is indeed one of real improvement will depend on the answers we explore and give to those three questions.

Gauguin intended that the picture should be read from right to left. On the right, then, there's an image of where we come from – a tiny helpless baby, amid those who bear, who care, who nurture, who look after and look out for, and are always there for, the newborn. In the centre there is a depiction of what we are. On the left, a reflection on where we are going – an old human being near to death. Healthy children will not fear life, said Erik Erikson, if their elders have integrity enough not to fear death.

The central image recalls humankind in the Garden of Eden. But it does not depict, in Milton's famous lines, 'man's first disobedience, and the fruit of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste brought death into the world, and all our woe' – it is not an image of original sin or original wrongdoing, but an image of original blessing. Not a fall or transgression, but a rising, a progression. The figure represents all of us, both male and female, and of any and every ethnicity, reaching, stretching, venturing, achieving fruits from the tree of knowledge, the tree of life.

I wish life wouldn't spend me out
opposing. Wish same way creation
would have me stand it would have
me stretch, and hold high, my voice
Paul Robeson's, my inside eye
a sun.

But back to here and now, back to the present company. Where are we coming from? – we are coming from professional lifetimes of striving to raise Black achievement. What are? – comrades, colleagues, friends, travelling companions, we are vulnerable but vigilant, venturing, vigorous, valiant. Where are going? – we are going on going on, on a journey of improvement.

Notes and references

¹ E J B Rose and co-authors, *Colour and Citizenship: a report on British Race Relations*, Oxford University Press 1969, page 281.

² *Key Stage 4 Attainment by Pupil Characteristics in England in 2008/09*, http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000900/SFR34_2009Revised.pdf. However, this publication gave 39.4 per cent for African-Caribbean attainment. The figure was updated to 40 per cent in a paper dated 8 June 2010 (private communication).

³ *Making an Impact on Black Children's Achievement: examples of good practice from the Black Children's Achievement Programme*, Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010.

⁴ See for example *Chicago Teachers Wise Up to Obama School Privatizations* by Glen Ford, Black Agenda Radio, 15 June 2010. Much more substantially, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* by Diane Ravitch, New York: Basic Books, published on 9 February 2010.

⁵ Detailed questions and answers about eligibility for free school meals have been appeared recently in Hansard (6 April 2010), but there is no record of similar concerns in relation to Black children and young people,
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmhansrd/cm100406/text/100406w0048.htm>

⁶ 'When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me. Nor is my invisibility exactly a matter of biochemical accident or my epidermis. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come into contact. A matter of construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality.' Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

⁷ Tony Sewell, *Generating Genius*, Trentham Books 2009.

⁸ Peter Wanless, *Exclusion of Black Pupils: getting it, getting it right*, Department for Education and Skills Priority Review
<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ethnicminorities/resources/PriorityReviewSept06.pdf>

⁹ DCSF Research Brief, reference DCSF-RB177, November 2009, page 2

¹⁰ Simon Burgess and Ellen Greaves (2009), *Test Scores, Subjective Assessment and Stereotyping of Ethnic Minorities*, University of Bristol: Centre for Market and Public Organisation, working paper no. 09/221
<http://www.bris.ac.uk/cmpo/publications/papers/2009/wp221.pdf>

¹¹ Black prisoners make up 15 per cent of the prisoner population in the UK but only five per cent of the university student population (HESA student record 2007/2008), cited in *The Runnymede Bulletin*, spring 2010

¹² Shaun Bailey, quoted in an article by Yasmin Alibhai-Brown and Daniel James Henry, 'Young, Black and British: the young men who refuse to bow to the stereotypes', *Independent*, Saturday 22 November 2008

¹³ Margaret Thatcher at Bruges, 20 September 1988

¹⁴ 'Rightwing historian Niall Ferguson given school curriculum role' by Charlotte Higgins, *Guardian*, Monday 31 May 2010

¹⁵ 'This attempt to rehabilitate empire is a recipe for conflict' by Seamus Milne, *Guardian*, Thursday 10 June 2010

¹⁶ 'English Defence League: new wave of extremists plotting summer of unrest' by Matthew Taylor, *Guardian*, Friday 28 May 2010

¹⁷ Basic information about the Act is provided by a factsheet issued in June 2010 by the Government Equalities Office,
http://www.equalities.gov.uk/pdf/401674_GEO_EqualityBillFactsheet_acc.pdf

¹⁸ There is substantial criticism of the academies programme at the Compass education website, <http://compasseducation.org.uk/>. Most unfortunately, however, none of the contributors have so far included a central reference to ethnicity issues.