

Race on the Agenda

Shaping the future

- Getting the best education for Global Majority children and young people**

Voluntary Action Islington

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Delivering quality education as an entitlement of all

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So, here we are again.

Another conference on schooling and schooling outcomes for global majority children. I do not have much time, so let me make a couple brief observations to place this talk in context.

In 1969, the very first all-party parliamentary select committee report on race and immigration was published. The title of the report was: The Problems of Coloured School Leavers. Among the things it said were:

‘West Indian parents have unrealistic aspirations for their children...

They equate length of time spent in school with quality of educational outcomes’

The source of their high aspirations of course was their life experience with Britain in the Caribbean prior to moving to Britain and above all the ample evidence they had of education as a route to self-improvement and social transformation, especially for the children of the poor and dispossessed.

In the aftermath of the battle between black youths and the police at the Notting Hill Carnival in August 1976, sociological analyses came thick and fast. The following responses, for example, are illuminating:

"Those youngsters' behaviour was in complete opposite to many of those who spent weeks of their time devoting their artistic talent in brightening up the Grove for the Carnival

Black community leaders who thought it their duty to intervene in quelling the riot were shown little respect for their efforts. They were sworn at and abused like children and their credibility as respected leaders of the black community will no doubt be questioned."

- Editorial, 'West Indian World' 3 September 1976

The editor of the Caribbean Weekly Post went much further:

"But while the state has a lot to answer for, so too have West Indian parents. The Asians have in contrast maintained a strong family discipline and motivated their children in the direction of material success. But West Indian parents for the main part have lost control over their children who have fallen into the hands of nihilistic merchants of rhetoric who seem to believe that a lot of fancy words about revolution can bring about a Utopia."

- Robert Govender, Editor, 1 September 1976

The Community Relations Commission in that period directed their self-help funding predominantly towards 'alienated West Indians'. Of the Asian youth they had this to say:

"The Asian youth are not yet alienated to the extent that they could fall within the category of persons who are beyond the reach of the normal social services or who are homeless or unemployed [in other words, unlike those alienated West Indians]. The fact is that the Asian youth is generally more in touch with its parents or relatives and is likely to find employment in the family

business. Applications submitted by Asian organisations, therefore, tend to be concerned more with religious and cultural centres and places of leisure activities. Under-achievement and unemployment among Asian youths are not yet as serious as they are among young West Indians. However, the fact that no Asian organisation has so far been supported under the Self-Help Scheme has been used by some of the Asian leaders as an example of the Commission's indifference to the problems of young Asians."

Roll on twenty five years and we have a government consultation paper saying this:

We are determined that all ethnic minority pupils should secure results that are as good as those for other pupils. Many ethnic minority children have benefited from the recent rise in school standards, and children from some minority groups achieve highly. But, for others, there is still an unacceptable inequality in levels of attainment which must be reduced....

Green Paper: Schools – Building on Success, Her Majesty's Government 2001

We are determined that all ethnic minority pupils should secure results that are as good as those for other pupils.

Good as those for **all** other pupils?

Who are these undifferentiated "other pupils"? In fact, 'other pupils' is simply a euphemism for **white pupils**?

But, do all white pupils achieve good results?

Why did those who drafted that paper not reflect the reality that obtained even then and say:

'that are as good as those for an increasing number of ethnic minority pupils' ?

Then, as now, the government's own analysis of GCSE and 'A' level results showed Indian and Chinese students outperforming whites, boys and girls, by a huge margin.

Equally disturbing is the statement that

"children from some minority ethnic groups achieve highly"

Surely, the reality is that **some children from all ethnic minority groups achieve highly** but more children from some ethnic minority groups (Chinese, West African, Indian) achieve higher levels of attainment than is the case for other ethnic minority groups.

This dangerous and unintelligent characterisation of schooling outcomes for the nation's children led me to write to the Education Secretary in these terms:

'The Government cannot hope to succeed in encouraging schools "to set high expectations for all" if it so carelessly indulges in its own form of stereotyping, thus failing to interrogate received wisdom on this sensitive and complex issue....

'On the contrary, it will succeed in projecting "ethnic minority" students as an undifferentiated mass, pathologically defined, as if the lack of attainment with which the group as a whole has come to be identified is somehow congenitally determined'.

- Gus John to Estelle Morris

And that brings me to our own present day education guru:

"What we now see in schools are children undermined by poor parenting, peer-group pressure and an inability to be responsible for their own behaviour. They are not subjects of institutional racism. They have failed their GCSEs because they did not do the homework, did not pay attention and were disrespectful to their teachers. **Instead of challenging our children we have given them the discourse of the victim – a sense that the world is against them and they cannot succeed.**"

Sewell, A. Master class in victimhood. *Prospect*, October 2010, (p. 33).

One year earlier, we had another expert, Adrian Hart, pronouncing that racism in schools is a myth and that recording racist incidents actually causes them:

‘Thankfully, racism is declining in society at large, and especially in schools, where children are increasingly expressing their natural colour-blindness, and building peer groups of many different ethnicities. Very young children cannot, in fact, be racist, or at least not in the way that adults imagine: they do not yet have systematic beliefs about social groups or ethnicity. If they use words adults consider extremely offensive, they often do so without understanding their meaning.

Indeed anti-racist policy itself has become a key racialising influence in schools: its result is to encourage children to identify with their ethnic group, and to consider their relationships with children from other ethnic groups as fraught and somehow different. Through events such as Black History Month or Holocaust Memorial Day, children are encouraged to ‘think race’.

The Myth of Racist Kids, Summary and recommendations to government
- Adrian Hart, October 2009, published by The Manifesto Club

This is a recommendation not only to end the practice of recording racist incidents in schools, but to tear up the Equality Act 2010 altogether and forget about the public duty, as indeed many schools had done with the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000.

In my written submission to the Children’s Commissioner’s Inquiry on school exclusions, I said as follows:

Which factors do you consider influence schools’ decisions to exclude?

In my experience, these factors include:

- a) Concern about students’ conduct undermining school discipline even when the student clearly needs support with self

management and in dealing with conflict. This is especially the case when teachers are involved and feel that they cannot be seen to 'lose face' in their interactions with students

- b) 'Zero tolerance' approaches to students' misdemeanours as a strategy for ensuring total conformity. This often results in students feeling aggrieved and angry, especially when they are punished for retaliating to the conduct of others, triggering conduct which the teacher did not witness
- c) Failure to acknowledge that **children bring what they are to school, warts and all, and they are what they bring**, and that it is part of the function of schooling to guide and support them in unlearning inappropriate behaviours, developing strategies for self-management, anger management, conflict management; strategies not just for surviving schooling but for making it work for them
- d) Failure to have regard to the context of students' poor discipline or venting of anger and to show compassion and understanding
- e) Students refusing to comply with what they consider to be teachers' unreasonable or unjust instructions
- f) Students being rude and defiant towards staff and failing to treat them with respect
- g) Students unapologetically disrupting teaching and other students' learning and not heeding warnings about the consequences of continuing such behaviour
- h) Bullying and intimidation of other students or/and of staff, including racial, homophobic or Islamophobic bullying
- i) Students putting themselves and others at risk of harm
- j) Students not conforming to schools' uniform policy
- k) Students bringing the school into disrepute on account of their conduct on the way to or from school
- l) Students' committing criminal offences in or out of school
- m) Schools interpreting students' conduct in school as evidence of their involvement in anti-social behaviour or in gang activity outside school
- n) Lack of cultural sensitivity on the part of school management and staff

Let me share just two recent examples of the above from my experience as a parent and my work as an advocate for young people and parents:

- a) A Year 9 student was excluded for five days for punching a boy who had called him 'a bloody nigger'. He then broke down in tears in front of the abuser. The abuser complained to a teacher who intervened and got the racially abused student excluded for physical assault. The abuser was excluded for two days. He was not made to apologise to the boy he had abused, nor did his parents apologise to the boy and his parents. As far as the school was concerned, the punishment was warranted because the abused boy knew that physical violence would not be tolerated.

- b) CEN, the education charity I chair, is currently dealing with a case in which a 4 year old has been permanently excluded by a Church of England primary school for 'sexually inappropriate behaviour'. The child has been kept at home so far for nearly six weeks. The school tried to get him into a pupil referral unit but the PRU refused to have him on the grounds that he is a little child and should not be excluded and expected to start his schooling career in a pupil referral unit.

What kind of a country is it that makes it legal for a school to use the power to exclude a child of that age for any conceivable reason? What sort of schooling system, what kind of Church is it that would stigmatise a small child in that manner? What sexually appropriate behaviour is the child supposed to display?

The little boy is black.

Even at his tender age, he and his parents cannot have an expectation that his school would act with common sense, discharge a duty of care and guide the child's development. On the contrary, he is starting his schooling career with a blot on his record and stereotypes heaped upon him and his family by a church school that simultaneously purports to teach Christian values. The fact remains that education law empowers the school

to take such action and the Independent Appeals Panel is no longer authorised to compel the school to reinstate the child.

It is this absurd obsession with punishment that lies at the heart of this country's record for jailing the most people in Western Europe, excluding the most young people from school, having the most illiterate prison population, and all the rest of it. Is it any wonder, then, that rather than examining the systemic issues that lie beneath the eruption of violence in August 2011, all David Cameron and his government could do is show the nation and the world how tough they could be on 'sick', 'feral', 'thugs' and 'criminals'.

I have many problems with Dr Sewell's analysis which undergirds the position of a wide spectrum of people, from David Cameron to Ian Duncan Smith, to various government approved gang busters, to the government's Chief Inspector and Head of Ofsted. Apart from the fact that it buys into the rhetoric of that Green Paper I quoted above, it pathologizes global majority school students and their families and presents a decidedly non-nuanced analysis of a phenomenon that is challenging in its complexity.

Let me share an anecdote with you and believe me it is but one of hundreds.

In January 1989 and 1990, there was a massive primary teacher shortage in London. As Director of Education, I had just recruited 50 teachers in Trinidad to come and teach in Hackney. Two weeks after starting to teach there, one of the teachers decided to take his children to Homerton Library. As they walked along Homerton High Street, a builder's pick-up truck drove by. One man in that truck slung a block of wood out of the truck, shouting as he did so: 'Go home, you fucking Paki'. The plank struck the teacher knocking him to the ground, concussed, in front of his petrified children. Thankfully, we did not have to deal with yet one more racist murder on that occasion. The teacher was Indo-Caribbean, a descendant of the indentured labourers who had

been transported from India to the Caribbean and to what was then British Guyana as the trade in enslaved Africans drew to an end.

I had delivered an induction programme to the teachers in Trinidad, dealing with contexts of schooling and education in Britain, including racism and racial violence in schools. Less than two years before, I had written with Ian Macdonald QC, Reena Bhavnani and Lily Khan ***Murder in the Playground***, the report of the inquiry into the racist murder of 14 year old Ahmed Iqbal Ullah at Burnage High School in South Manchester. But, nothing could have prepared that teacher and his family for that horrific experience in Homerton.

We had to provide the children with counselling, support and guidance and equip them with strategies for dealing not only with racial violence and racist name-calling in their community and in school, but with the attitude and conduct of their teachers. Those traumatised children, like the children of the other Trinidad teachers, showed themselves to be performing at a much higher level, especially in English and Maths, than their classmates, including Indian children. Nevertheless, the teachers clearly lumped them with the African-Caribbean children, of whom the Trinidad teachers complained that the schools were expecting far too little, rather than with the high performing Indian children.

No one can convince me that it would have been sensible, let alone responsible, to treat that racist incident simply as something the children would 'snap out of', or as having nothing at all to do with what they might experience in the community around them, or experience at school. I believed then and I still believe now that it was my duty and that of the officer I had designated to look after the teachers' and their families' pastoral and welfare needs, to prepare those children to deal with the reality of racism in schooling in Britain. What would have been irresponsible was to ignore their lived experience, celebrate the fact that they were talented and focused learners and pretend that they could simply

forge ahead and not concern themselves with how they were being treated in the schooling system on account of their ethnic background.

They came to Londoners as confident individual learners, yes. But that did not prevent their teachers basing their expectations of their performance upon the stereotypes and attitudes they had adopted towards African-Caribbean children as a group.

To conclude this story, it would not surprise you to hear that perhaps the greatest frustration those Trinidad teachers had was having to witness the rate at which their children regressed in this schooling system. In fact, in order to halt that regression, practically all of them needed to spend many hours tutoring those children, on top of all the work they themselves had to do as classroom teachers and as students registered on various post-graduate programmes while teaching.

Now, we are going to have an open, free, honest and democratic debate here today. So, if anyone here present knows of any reason why Augustine John and Anthony Sewell should not be joined..... at the hip....., then don't all speak at once.

Seriously, though, if anyone here has evidence that the answer to any one of the following questions should be 'No', then please provide it and let us debate it:

Do African Caribbean school students have a stereotypically negative profile in the schooling system that dates back to the 1960s? YES

Do they tend to get put in bottom sets and streams? YES

Do far too many teachers have low expectations of them? YES

Do far too many of them have too low expectations of themselves and demand too little of themselves? YES

Do they get punished much more harshly than their white counterparts for the same misdeeds? YES

Do they get permanently excluded at a much higher rate than their white counterparts? YES

Are the 'zero tolerance' policies of academies leading to more exclusions (of black boys especially) than in state comprehensives? YES

Are mixed heritage children overtaking Black Caribbean Boys in the exclusion tables? YES

Are those with one African parent and one white parent being excluded in greater numbers than those with one African parent and one Chinese or Indian parent? YES

Are African heritage children the subject of police attention in schools and on the streets more than any other ethnic group? YES

Is that irrespective of their high performance at school? YES

Is there evidence that they fare better in teacher assessment when test papers are anonymised and teachers cannot tell who the subjects are? YES

Does all of that amount to an 'ethnic penalty' that is imposed disproportionately upon African heritage students? YES

Is there institutional racism in schools? YES

Do global majority students **and** staff experience it? YES

Are some of them their own worst enemy? YES

In my book *The Case for a Learner's Charter for Schools*, I raise the fundamental question of whether it is rational, morally justifiable or consistent with the intent of 'Every Child Matters' and 'No Child Left Behind' for schools to adopt an approach which requires children to divest themselves of all traits and preoccupations which might get in the way of their learning, and present themselves pristine and eager to receive all the school has to offer.

Unlike most of the other government services that impact upon children's lives, schooling is compulsory. Parents face sanctions, including being sent to jail, for not making sure their children attend school, irrespective of whatever parenting challenges they themselves might be grappling with.

School students are not a homogenous group any more than parents are. They come from a multiplicity of backgrounds defined by ethnicity, social class, gender, disability, language, religion and belief, geography, post code, level of literacy of parent(s), those parents' own experience of the schooling system, etc. Different categories of schools have admission procedures that act as a filter, ensuring that they admit only those students whose backgrounds they see as compatible with the regime they are operating and the profile they want to project to the 'market'. They therefore operate two forms of exclusion, before and after admission.

Crucially and irrespective of their background, one thing is common to all school children: they bring what they are and they are what they bring, including their social and cultural capital or lack of it. Some are competent learners who know how to learn, how they learn best and how to challenge themselves and stretch teachers to enable them to perform to the height of their ability. Others are challenged by learning and lack the capacity to form and sustain positive relationships with their teachers and other

learning facilitators. Some take responsibility for creating a safe and supportive environment in which teachers and students could teach and learn. Others make it their business to create the environment in which they function best and which makes no demands on them but hinders others' capacity to teach and to learn.

Irrespective of their disposition, however, ALL are required by law to attend school.

This raises a number of key issues and questions:

- What is the purpose of schooling and education?
- Does every child have an education entitlement?
- When do they forfeit that entitlement?
- Does EVERY child really matter?
- When do they cease to matter enough so as not to have their needs met, however complex, and their rights safeguarded?

I have long maintained that since we have presently and have had for decades ample evidence of how the school system operates and disadvantages far too many of our children, we have a duty to equip them with the strategies, skills and competences not only to survive schooling but to enhance their learning outcomes. Time does not allow me to discuss these various strategies here, but I just want to share a model I use in my work with groups of students and in the mentoring I do with six African heritage boys. First, the Leaders and Managers model:

Distributed Leadership as a means of structuring the management of schools and providing support for teaching and learning is becoming more and more fashionable. Invariably, however, school regimes see Distributed Leadership as having to do exclusively with school managers and teachers. School students are not generally considered to be Leaders and Managers of Learning. My model seeks to encourage them to see themselves and to act as Leaders and Managers.

So, what's the script?

Leaders and Managers

I am a Leader and Manager

I am Special

I am Special in My Own Eyes

I am Special to my Family

I am Special to my School

I am Special to my Friends

I am a Leader of my Life

I am Leader of my Learning

I am a Leader in my Class

I am a Leader among my Friends

I am a Leader by Example

I am a Leader with Values

I am a Leader because I live my Values

I am a Manager of my Self

I am a Manager of my Time

I am a Manager of my High Ambitions

I am a Manager of my Learning

I am a manager of my Behaviour

I am a Manager of my Expectations

I am a Manager of my Relationships

I am a Manager of my Emotions

I am a Manager of my Goals

I am a Manager of my Disappointments

I am a Manager of my Success!

The Leaders and Managers programme involves facilitating interactive sessions with young people in order to explore each of the above affirmations, what it means for them, what would assist them in making the affirmation a reality, in other words, something that accurately defines them, and what support and guidance they need as they seek to embrace the entire package. Recently, I spent two days in a residential settings working with a group of young people to explore just two of those affirmations:

I am a Leader with Values

I am a Leader because I live my Values

And finally, for the students and parents among us, and everybody else for that matter, let me leave with **the Gus John Pledge:**

I will let no one

I will let no circumstance

I will let nothing

Not even my own timid Self

Render me less than I am or

Less than I Know I Have

The Capacity to BE!

**Gus John
London
31 October 2012**