

### Resisting racism: The Black supplementary school movement

The Black supplementary school movement is over forty years old and represents a grassroots challenge to the racism that Black children have faced in the British school system. Scholarship on racism and education has tended to focus on how to fix the mainstream schools and the supplementary school movement has therefore been under researched. The grassroots nature of the movement makes it very difficult to research. Projects emerge organically out of community concern and there is often very little connection between different supplementary schools, even in the same city ((Best, 1990). Therefore any accurate analysis looking for numbers of programmes, different types and how this has changed over the time is extraordinarily difficult and likely impossible. Such a quantitative approach to researching the movement would also not lead to a detailed understanding of the dynamics involved or the nature of supplementary schooling and how this has evolved. Therefore, I comprehensively analysed the principles and underlying basis of the Black supplementary school movement, which involved completing three pieces of research (Andrews, 2013).

The first was an archival analysis of documents held at the George Padmore Institute in London relating to the educational resistance and supplementary schools emerging from the New Beacon Bookshop collective. The second was an interview study with sixteen people involved in the movement historically and contemporarily. The third was an ethnography in one of the oldest supplementary schools in Britain, where I volunteered as a teacher for a school year and recorded my experiences. The purpose of this comprehensive analysis of the movement was to understand the emergence, ideologies and tensions that lie at the heart of Black supplementary schooling. In doing so, three principal themes emerged when understanding the importance and development of the movement.

The first is that Blackness underpins the movement and separates it from complementary schools of ethnic minority groups based on language and culture. The second is that there exists a split of ideologies between a more conservative approach seeking accommodation into the school system and a more critical stance that questions the validity of mainstream schooling. Finally, though the movement had the opportunity to significantly change mainstream schooling the opposite appears to have occurred, with supplementary schools becoming embedded within the system of schooling. The emphasis is no longer on addressing the racism in the schools but is now on fixing the deficits in the community, families and individual Black children. The embers of critical approach to racism in education remain but a reconnection to those roots is essential.

#### *Blackness in the supplementary school movement*

Blackness underpins the Black supplementary school movement, being the common feature that unites different projects. Blackness is the glue that holds an otherwise fragmented movement together. Unlike the complementary schools that various ethnic minority communities have formed for over a hundred years, Black supplementary schools are not based on language, religion or necessarily cultural instruction (Hall, Özerk, Zulfiqar, & Tan, 2002). They are formed on the basis of Black communities responding the needs of their children because of the deficits in the mainstream school system.

Discussions of Blackness become particularly important because the construction of Black in the movement is in direct opposition to the majority of theory and conceptual work in British academia. The academy embraces a politically 'black' definition, which is meant to encompass all those who experience racism, essentially meant to include everyone who is not White. This politically black position openly rejects Blackness rooted in African ancestry as

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being too exclusive and creating ‘disunity’ between different groups (Maylor, 2009). However, it is precisely Blackness in African Ancestry that is the basis of the supplementary school movement.

Blackness has been marginalised in British academia for number of reasons. The embrace of political blackness is tied up with the debate between anti-racism and multiculturalism, with the former rejecting the latter because of its focus on culture rather than politics and the separating out of different groups to compete with one another (Nagle, 2008). The strategic essentialism of political blackness is said to be needed to unite all minorities in a collective struggle against racism. Multiculturalism, particularly on the state level, is certainly problematic but there is no need to connect Blackness in African Ancestry with the worst tendencies of multiculturalism.

Embracing Blackness has always been a political stance to connect the African Diaspora into a collective struggle. When Malcolm X (1971, p. 91) declared ‘there is a new type of Negro... he calls himself a Black man’ this was not a passive appeal to culture. Blackness is connected into Pan Africanism and follows a tradition of resistance dating back centuries, even pre-enslavement<sup>1</sup>. Far from being an exclusive category Blackness is a broad church that brings in the entire African Diaspora. Such politics of identity is criticised as being essentialist and restrictive, reducing people to categories (Phoenix, 1998). However, the essentialism in Blackness is not a cultural one, where we all need to dress, talk and act the same, but of a political nature where we are connected into a common struggle. There is no expectation in Black activism that simply being Black will mean we will all act and think the same. As one of the participants in my research explained of Blackness ‘it’s a community, so you expect a range of responses’. So Blackness as articulated in the movement is political and flexible enough to respond to its criticisms.

An important critique of political blackness is also implicit in the supplementary school movement. Political blackness is based on those experiences racism uniting to overcome it. However, racism does not function in a simple Black/White dynamic. Different groups are subject to different processes of racial discrimination and schooling is a perfect example of this. The statistics on achievement have been relatively stable for decades with Indian and Chinese students outperforming Whites and Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Black (Caribbean, Mixed and increasingly African) and Travellers underperforming (Gillborn, 2008). There is no unified experience of racial discrimination in the school system, and therefore a sustained politics of based on non-Whiteness was always going to be limited. The activism arising from the Black supplementary school movement arose with specific regard to the inequalities facing Black (and predominantly Caribbean) students and is shaped by this resistance.

From completing the research it was clear that one of the main successes of supplementary schools is the Black led environment of the programmes. It is important to stress that Black led does not mean exclusively Black. I did not come across a Black supplementary school in the research that would reject either students or teachers who were not Black. In fact, a number of the programmes that I spoke to had students and occasionally teachers from different backgrounds. All of the programmes were, however, Black led in that they were predominantly staffed by Black teachers and students. This ‘fraternity of colour’ was

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<sup>1</sup> This tradition includes African conflicts with Arabs as early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century (Walker, 2006); Slave rebellions, Ethiopianism and Garveyism (Campbell, 2007); Black Power (Carmichael, 1971) and even the more liberal Civil Rights Movement (Dyson, 2000)

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essential to the success of the schools for reasons that emerge out of the need for the movement in the first instance (Chevannes & Reeves, 1987).

When Bernard Coard wrote the seminal work *How the West Indian child is Made Educationally Sub-Normal in the British School System* in (1971, p.18), he identified teacher expectations and attitudes as being a key mechanism by which racism was reproduced in the school system:

There are three main ways in which a teacher can seriously affect the performance of a Black child: by being openly prejudiced, by being patronizing, and by having low expectations of a child's abilities. All three attitudes can be found among teachers in this country. Indeed these attitudes are widespread.

Black supplementary schools represent spaces where the teachers do not have a default setting of low expectations. The movement was set up precisely because the concerned members of the community believed that Black children should be doing better than they were in the school system. A number of the participants in my research spoke of the supplementary schools being about instilling in the students a sense that they had to 'overachieve' and there were many stories of how students had achieved great success in their mainstream school careers. The word 'family' was often used in the interviews to express how the dynamic of the relationship between students and teachers. Supplementary schools are certainly seen as places to do work and with disciplinary structures, but they are also a nurturing environment where the students receive support. This can be in stark contrast to experiences that Black children have in the mainstream schools, which can be defined by a conflict based relationship with the teachers and school system (Graham & Robinson, 2004).

Another common critique of the mainstream school system is the lack of material that relates to the Black population (Hannan, 1987). Again, Coard (1971, p. 30) lamented this situation in the school system arguing that the Black child 'develops a deep inferiority complex' and 'soon loses motivation to succeed academically'. Writing of the paucity of and Black focused curriculum in the schools Chevannes and Reeves (1987, p. 147) explain that 'it is not possible to supplement what does not exist' in the mainstream schools. The Black led nature of the supplementary school movement means that this lack of representation can be addressed with the students; which is why Black history and cultures have been a mainstay of the education produced. The other advantage of the Black led space is that sensitive topics can be addressed in a way that may not be possible in mainstream schools. Teaching about African enslavement is an excellent example of the importance of the Black led environment.

Enslavement can be a difficult topic to teach because of the violence and oppression that lies at the heart of the African Holocaust. The tensions that this can cause, particularly in mixed groups, are evident in the reaction to the first airing of the biopic *Roots*, which details enslavement, on British television. The first episode sparked anger in Black children at the treatment of their ancestors by White's and there were literally fights in schools because of this across the country the next day (Warsama, 2007). White on Black overt and brutal racism is central to the teaching of enslavement, which is always going to raise issues. In the supplementary school where I carried out the ethnography we felt it important to deal with the issue of enslavement head on because it is central to the narrative of why we are in Britain and also students constantly asked about it. We spared the graphic details for the younger students but made it clear the system of racism. One of the students in the school Caleb, explained that 'White people used to whip us', whilst another, Julian, was notably angry

about the history and asked ‘why didn’t we just kill them[White people] in their sleep’. In the context of the Black led environment, where everyone was a descendant of Africans who were enslaved, we were able to relate to and discuss the visceral emotions that the topic generated. The students felt comfortable in the environment to express their raw feelings and we were able over a series of weeks to discuss the issues, provide a background and connect into their experiences of racism that were having in mainstream schools. It is impossible to overestimate the strength of the Black led environment in creating a comfortable space to discuss these issues. Importantly we were also able to tell the story of enslavement in a way that did not give the impression of Africans as passive victims of their oppression. Judging by the bicentennial of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 2007 and the saviour status given to William Wilberforce and the passive victim role assigned to Africans, it is probably best that the teaching of Black history is left to Black led environments.

Black Studies are an essential part of the supplementary school movement to give students a sense of self that was not possible from the mainstream curriculum alone. However, the primary aim is to help Black students succeed in the mainstream school system. This is why the teaching of Maths and English is a universal feature of Black supplementary schools. Due to the racism in the school system Black students were not given an equal chance to learn the staple subjects and therefore Stone (1981, p. 97) explained that ‘acquiring basic educational skills was the basis of what went on in supplementary schools’. By examining the scope and nature of how Black Studies feature in different supplementary schools we can begin to see the ideological differences within the movement.

#### *Official vs. self-help: ideological tensions*

Stone defined the different types of organisation in supplementary schools as those that were ‘official’, composed of trained teachers, potentially funded and linked into mainstream curriculum; compared to the ‘self-help’ programmes that did not seek government funding, nor trained teachers and often had a conflict based relationship with the state. For Stone the self-help programmes potentially did more harm than good as they did not have the skills or intentions to help children succeed in the mainstream. In truth the split in the movement is not based on the organisational principles, as there are self-funded projects, with no reliance on the state that focus primarily on mainstream attainment. The significant split in the movement is ideological and Stone represents a conservative perspective that denotes success in the mainstream school is the sole purpose of the movement. Black Studies take on a particular role from this view.

The primacy of Black history and culture in the conservative segment of the movement is connected into the psychological proposition that Black children need to understand their history for self-esteem and to locate their place in the world (Coard, 1971). Therefore the paucity of curriculum relating to themselves in the mainstream is a deficit that needs to be overcome in order for children to succeed. The connection of self-esteem to poor Black self-image is one with deep roots in Black communities and research. Clark and Clark (1940) conducted the foundational study in America that found Black young girls favoured White dolls over Black ones when given the choice. The conclusion drawn from this finding was that Black children disliked their Blackness and therefore suffered from self-hate and low self-esteem, which would hamper progress in society. The idea of Black self-hate is certainly present in the discourse surrounding the need for Black supplementary schools. A flyer for a programme run by a Methodist Church in Clapham in 1982 explains that:

insufficient positive reinforcement of the black child's self-image within the schools based on racist textbooks and other material REINFORCE A NEGATIVE SELF-IMAGE WHICH IS FOUND IN THE MEDIA AND IN WHITE SOCIETY AT LARGE. If the schools do not offer a positive self-image it is hardly surprising that black youths see themselves as failures before they have even begun.

This perspective is rooted in a version of conservatism because it focuses the issue at the individual level. Black students are failing because of low self-esteem due to not seeing positive images of themselves. Therefore the remedy to this is to foster a positive self-concept through exposing them to powerful figures from Black history that they can be proud of. The self-concept argument is not one that necessarily challenges the structures of mainstream schooling or society more generally. At best it calls for the development of an inclusive curriculum that can promote a more positive self-image but the more dangerous tendencies of the argument end up lambasting the Black community for the deficits of self-esteem in the children. From the more critical perspective there is a more fundamental challenge that emerges in the use of Black Studies.

Within the more critical programmes there is an implicit criticism of not just the way the schools work but also the basis of the education produced. From this perspective it is necessary to decolonise the minds of Black children and present a Black education that offers alternative political perspectives. This has manifested in teachings about radical figures including Garvey and the Black Panthers, and also an African centred approach to the curriculum. For the conservative element such political approaches are unhelpful to the ultimate goal of mainstream success. In fact, there was some resistance to using the supplementary school movements as part of a wider political struggle. Angela, one of the participants in my research explained how they:

did not see the school as an arena for a political battle to be fought about those Black children. While some of the Black supplementary school, they actually use those as political battlegrounds, what we did because we're all members of political parties; we took those issues in to the political parties and didn't implicate or misuse those children.

Whilst Angela advocated Black Studies in the movement she made it clear that her supplementary schools were meant as safe spaces for Black children to learn mainstream curriculum and about themselves in order to success in society.

Often Black Studies, political education and mainstream attainment have been discussed as if they were mutually exclusive and antagonistic to each other. When interviewing Errol for the research the Lumumba School, where I did the ethnography, came up. He said of the programme 'you can't get a job by learning about Africa', a comment based on the reputation of the supplementary school for a focus on African centred teaching. However, the focus on Black Studies has been overstated. Firstly, even the more radical of the self-help programmes that I researched made space for mainstream subjects and used curriculum material like worksheets. The Lumumba School was no exception and we spent half the day going through mainstream worksheets with the students. Success in the mainstream schools is a goal across the movement. Secondly, and more fundamentally, there are skills that are necessary for mainstream success that can be learnt and practiced using more critical material. For example, the George Padmore Supplementary School, emerging from the New Beacon Bookshop, got students to do reading comprehension using the Black Panther George Jackson's *Soledad Brother*. At the Lumumba Saturday school we engaged students in discussions of topics such as enslavement, racism and Black figures from history, which

encouraged the use of analytical and verbal skills. Neither of these activities is directly related to the mainstream curriculum but it is clear how they would benefit students in their work in the school system. All of these activities were also overtly political. The choice of figures from history to discuss with the students purposefully presented a more radical critique of society; for example we looked at Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Nanny of the Maroons, and Queen Nzinga. However, the political nature of this education did not detract from teaching skills necessary for mainstream success.

A central challenge facing the movement is how to attract students to do extra schooling. Supplementary schooling is predominantly focussed on primary school children because when children get older and able to choose their activities, more education does not necessarily rate highly. A more innovative curriculum based around students experience and interests is a potential way to make supplementary schooling more 'attractive'. For example, getting students involved in projects to improve their local area or using music as a medium to teach are all possibilities for engagement. It is certainly necessary to present an alternative education that the students can engage with.

The tension between academic attainment and Black Studies has been overemphasised but the split between the conservative and oppositional approaches is a significant one in the movement. With the incorporation of the Black church into the movement and the increasing support of supplementary schools from the state; there is a tendency to see the official trend as one that recently evolved in the movement. However, the conservative perspective has always been present and represents some of the earliest programmes. The role of the Black church is an interesting one in understanding the movement.

The Black church is the largest organisation within the Black community, with significant organisational capacity and influence (Pearson, 1978). The relationship between the Black church and the supplementary school movement has not always been as close as presently. Four of the people involved in supplementary schooling ran projects directly out of a church building, and another was heavily influenced by their Christian mission; with the church mainstay of the movement now. However, Menelik, who was involved in starting one of the earliest supplementary schools, explained that:

Some of the churches wouldn't have Saturday schools ... the church congregation wouldn't support it. It's frightened about being Black and being aware of who you are and having a racial identity so that that was a big problem for a lot of people.

The fear of radical element of Blackness is certainly a theme that emerged from the interviews. Clive shared his distaste for a 'Black nationalist perspective' and when talking about Black independent schools Errol explained that 'for race relations and all the rest of it it's a non-starter'. When supplementary school first emerged there was resistance from the state, as there was fear about what untrained members of the Black community would be teaching the children (Tomlinson, 1985). Menelik talk about how the local education authority wanted to 'smash' the movement. The reticence of the churches to get involved must be seen in this light. The Black church is at the same time both the most independent sector of organisation with its own funding and buildings, and also largely accommodated into mainstream society, with its messages of forgiveness and integration. It is not a coincidence that the increasing presence of the Black led churches in the movement is twinned with the accommodation of supplementary schooling into mainstream structures and state funding streams.

The practical accommodation into the mainstream has existed to some extent for decades, what has emerged more recently is that supplementary schooling has accommodated some of the ideologies of mainstream schooling. Where once racism in the schools was blamed for the failure of Black children, a focus is now placed on the role the family and community play in reproducing educational inequalities.

### *The spectre of underachievement*

Though official projects were always to some extent accommodated within mainstream schooling, this has become more so the case in recent years<sup>2</sup>. For example, there is now an emphasis on the accreditation of supplementary schools to ensure that they meet certain criteria. This accreditation is used to gain access to certain pools of funding from the state and voluntary sector. The main areas for accreditation schemes are in governance, organisations and preparation in order to make sure the projects are sustainable. In fairness to the accreditation process it does not preclude programmes that take an alternative approach to education. However it does mark a trend in movement of supplementary schools seeking to officially legitimise their practice.

Mainstream schools have also learnt from the supplementary schools and began to run extended hours, including opening on the weekends. A general trend has emerged where parents of all backgrounds are hiring tutors to help their children attain the necessary qualifications and supplementary schooling can increasingly be seen as fulfilling part of this desire. One of the participants in my research explained how a parent had complained about the teaching of Black Studies because they were ‘paying for the children to learn how to pass exams’.

Supplementary schooling has always been driven by getting Black children to pass exams but the initial movement was based on an acknowledgement that the school system was racially discriminating against the community. Reeves and Chevannes (1983) warned against the dangers in the discourse of underachievement and how it located the blame for inequalities in the individual lives of Black students. However, a key finding from my research was that a shift has occurred from highlighting racism in the schools to focusing on problems of parenting and the socialisation of Black young people. It is not that people felt that the schools were no longer racist; in fact it was the opposite. The consensus was that racism was an almost permanent feature of the school system but it had become hidden and much harder to fight as a result of this. It is perhaps for this reason that the focus has shifted onto the problems in the family and community; it is more difficult to sustain campaigns against what is seen as ‘undercover’ racism.

The overriding message from the movement is one that children have to succeed in spite of the barriers of racism that confront them. This discourse has a long history in Black communities, where it made clear that we have to work harder than others to succeed. As Hart of the West Indian Education Association explained it is necessary for Black children to:

make them competitive. Instil in them that to serve in a White man’s country and in an alien community, they have to work and study harder in order to be better than the rest. They must know that the opportunities are there, but because they are Black, to get them they must be

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<sup>2</sup> Although since the government cuts to funding in the voluntary sector, support in terms of funds has declined dramatically.

not merely as good as the White applicant, but a great deal better. This philosophy of life and living must be drilled into them from birth, so that it finally relates not only to sport and academic excellence, but permeates every aspect and facet of their lives.

Such a focus on hard work and competitiveness make sense given the situation Black children find themselves in. However, the narrative has developed into a *hyper-individualism* where Black people are being told to isolate themselves from their peers and community in order to single minded focus on success in society. This fits perfectly into the idea that the Black child needs to boost their self-concept in order to achieve. The problem with this logic is that it locates the solution to the problems faced by Black children in schools at the individual child level. If we can fix the children and inspire them then they will succeed. This is an inherently conservative idea because removes the critique from the school system; the focus becomes on changing the children and not changing the schools. This is danger in the 'underachievement' discourse; we should always be clear that it is not the children who are the schools; rather it is the system that is failing Black children.

The focus on the problems in the community was evident during the interviews I conducted with those involved in the movement in that there was a lot of criticism of parents and their commitment to the education of their children. Kwame, one of the participants, explained that due to the pressures placed on Black families in society parents were preoccupied with survival and did not have the capacity to nurture education in with their children. As he said:

Mother operates on what we call a subconscious base, and that means food, clothes, and shelter. The educational aspects, the exposing and stimulating the child at an early enough age, is no longer there, so you find children 0 to 5 who are very bright, but they're not stimulated. They're not preparing the children, they're not preparing work, engaging

The feeling was that this latest generation of parents was not as concerned with education as previous ones, and this was used to explain the decline in attendance at supplementary schools. There were numerous calls for Black parents to take a much more solid interest in supplementary schools and the education of their children in general. The narrative on parents has distinctly shifted from the early days of the movement. Parents were a fundamental driving factor in establishing and maintaining Black supplementary schools. There were also groups such as the Black Parents Movement, who were committed to activism to battle the inequalities in the school system. The role of parents in education nowadays is perceived by the participants in my study, to be of passive consumers of mainstream schooling who do not engage with, let alone challenge the system.

This discussion of parenting was often tied in with a narrative of the hard lives that Black children had to face and the allure of being drawn to what one participant called 'street life'. A strong theme that emerged from the interviews was how the supplementary schools need to encourage Black children away from the negative influences in their lives to succeed in school and life. Obviously this is a positive message but the discursive shift from being a movement to combat racial oppression in schooling to supplementary schools helping Black children survive their communities so they can achieve in mainstream schools is a significant one.

This shift is also borne out in the more critical self-help programmes. Whereas Black Studies was previously tied into a politics of resistance what has emerged is a focus on cultural education. African-centred approaches to learning can often be based on getting the students to culturally and spiritually embrace their African nature. Whilst there is nothing wrong with

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this in itself this is often done at the expense of a politics of resistance, with the embrace of Africaness itself seen as the solution. In essence this approach is the same as the conservative focus on the individual, appealing for the children to reject negative influences and fulfil their inner potential. The danger in taking such an approach is that we begin to locate the cause of the problems in the schools with the lifestyles of Black children, families and communities, rather than in the endemic racism at the core of the school system.

### *Conclusion*

The Black supplementary schools arose as a grassroots movement that challenged the racism in the mainstream school system. On the conservative and more critical ends of the spectrum all agreed that the schools were the problem and needed significant change. As racism has changed in nature and the movement has become more accommodated into the mainstream school system the focus has moved away from indicting the racism in the school system to aiming to help Black children as individuals succeed in schooling despite the negative influences surrounding them. At its strongest the movement had a chance to significantly change mainstream schooling developing alternative approaches to pedagogy and education, whoever it appear as though it is the school system that has fundamentally changed the nature of supplementary schools. Everyone involved in supplementary schooling is committed to the uplift of Black children and communities; however, we must return to the roots of the movement and again present an indictment of racism in the school system and develop a critical Black education to challenge it.

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