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## **Racism, Education and Black Self-organisation**

### **Aims and assumptions**

This article has several purposes. First of all, it attempts to add to the process of recording and analysing the struggles of those black people who have migrated to Britain since 1945, who have settled here, and whose children have carried on their proud tradition of creative self-organisation. It focuses on their struggle as parents and as students to transform the systems of school education that they encountered when they settled here. A strike organised by Caribbean parents and youth at Cowper Street School, Chapeltown, Leeds, in June 1973, is the main topic of the article. Details of this event have been 'hidden from history', having been only briefly recorded in newspapers. I also analyse the black children's Supplementary School in Leeds at that time.

It is sometimes assumed that political actions like these 'speak for themselves' and that history can be recorded simply as narrative. My second aim is to oppose that assumption. I was present during this particular struggle as an outsider, a recorder. I gathered texts, I spoke to those people who chose to speak to me and I attended those meetings which were more or less open. Thus the material has been selected; this account contains sins of omission and commission. I make an overt and a covert commentary on these events. Whatever type of authority the reader detects in the tone of voice in this article, I want you to remain aware that this kind of account is inevitably partial. All recordings and transmissions are. My account will, I hope, be supplemented by others.

From this annotated portrait of the events in Chapeltown, I move to a discussion which is even more contentious. The third aim is an attempt to place the Cowper Street strike in the context of activities organised by the Black Parents' Movement and the Black Students' Movement during the mid 1970's, and then to briefly compare these struggles with those organised by Asian parents and activists to oust Ray Honeyford as Headteacher of Drummond Middle School in Bradford in 1984-5. This section of the article is superficial, partly because I rely almost entirely on secondary sources whose status is as open to question as my own, and which I can approach only through the filter of my own memory and my own politics.

### **Some assumptions**

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One further point needs to be made to help the reader adopt a critical approach to this article. 'Race'<sup>1</sup> issues cannot be discussed neutrally in Britain. They cannot be neatly packaged within the academic text; this discussion is alive and painful whenever black pupils, students and parents are engaged in it. Each participant in the discussion is scrutinised not just for his or her intellectual competence but for his or her subjectivity, personal experience, emotional stance. Much more is at stake in these discussions than mere politics. This is a distressing but necessary process and those of us who take the risk of committing ourselves to paper need to make our assumptions clear.

Some of my assumptions come under the heading 'political/ intellectual'. I oppose the increasing tendency for academics and other commentators to draw boundaries around cultures and separate them into 'ethnic groups'. This effort to present social groups as though their cultures are homogenous is, in my view, intellectually untenable and politically unwise. It rides roughshod over the intricate differences in the ways in which disparate social histories are lived out in new social structures. It serves only the interests of those who wish to make a career out of their own proclaimed ethnicity, or who wish to advance themselves by deploying their claimed expertise in the ethnicities of the others, as they masquerade under a banner they have written called 'community'.

This is not to suggest that there are no common experiences and no differences. Culture is not yet a seamless blanket. For instance, the Afro-Caribbean experience over the past three hundred years is undoubtedly mutilated by the almost inconceivable horror of enforced removal, slavery and a conscious effort by whites to extinguish African cultures. (This is, perhaps, an ahistorical judgement; it rests on the assumption that the slave systems of the white imperialists since the seventeenth century were qualitatively different from the slaveries of the ancient world.) The historical experience of imperial domination in south Asia differs in some respects. Despite the racism of most of the white colonialists, aspects of Asian culture and achievement were highly valued, and the experiences of Asians who have emigrated to Britain after fairly long periods in Africa may further differentiate the ways in which various Asian communities will deal with the barriers set up by the white British. But these distinctions, increasingly often made by commentators who wish to assert that 'Asians' are different from 'Black people', are secondary to the overwhelming fact that, in contemporary Britain, anti-Asian racism runs parallel to racism against the people of the African diaspora.

My main starting point, however, is that a discussion of the situation of black citizens in Britain must arise from the understanding that both Asians and Caribbeans have been oppressed in this country, but never suppressed. Another way of putting this is to say that 'racism' is an inadequate summary of the experience of black people in Britain. Black people are not casualties; there is a growing catalogue of high achievement which bursts the boundaries unwittingly set by those who see nothing but persecution and humiliation in the black experience. By 'high achievement' I refer not only to the

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accepted indicators - formal qualifications, occupations with a high income and status - but to the many notable activities, unseen by most commentators, in churches, local organisations, musical enterprises, small businesses, political and cultural groups and such like. To put this point slightly differently, I would argue that, although 'anti-racism' is an increasingly inchoate political position, at least one strand of opinion within the anti-racist camp has something in common with the racist sociologies of culture : a tendency to homogenise culture and treat some 'members' of these supposed communities as though they are inanimate.

I make the further assumption that these issues should be analysed not simply for their intrinsic interest but in order to influence events. There is no space available here to make the much-needed critical evaluation of the academic, statistical research on the achievement rates of black and white pupils in schools. The absence of attention in the academic research to the self-organised activity of black parents and pupils is staggering. Nor is there space to connect the struggles outlined here with discussion of the various recommendations for policy changes within schools. But I will make one point. My own experience and my reading leads me to the conclusion that too many pupils are placed in situations in schools in which the choice to reject and rebel is as 'realistic' as the choice to pass examinations. This situation is not simply amenable to the efforts of individual teachers or even individual local education authorities. The structural underpinnings are usually beyond their reach. But change *is* possible within the classroom and a new approach from teachers would make a difference. Maureen Stone <sup>2</sup> has convincingly argued that teacher-inspired activities to enhance black pupils' self concept are unlikely to affect their rates of exam achievement, but it is my hypothesis that there is a new approach to black pupils and parents which would make a substantial difference to the education process. This approach would require teachers and administrators to place an informed and genuine value on the various cultures of the various black communities. This is not a plea for vacuous 'multi-culturalism'. Far from it. It is a plea for the *valuing* of the positive capabilities - which include self-organisation and rebellion - of black pupils.

These, then, are some of my political starting points. This is not the place to articulate my subjectivity. The close readers will, I hope, de-code the signs which are consciously and unconsciously placed in the text and draw their own conclusions. Footnotes are always fertile sources for these sleuths.

## **The Cowper Street School Strike**

My first example of an organised intervention into the educational process by Caribbean parents in Leeds took place during the summer of 1973. (The story of a slightly earlier intervention in the Studley Grange Children's Centre is referred to later but remains to be told in full.)

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Members of the United Caribbean Association (UCA) and the West Indian Afro Brotherhood<sup>3</sup> responded to the persistent complaints of black parents about teachers' attitudes and the standard of education at Earl Cowper Middle School in the heart of Chapeltown. In particular, parents were able to quote overtly racist remarks by the headteacher. The remark attributed to the headmaster that appeared to be the most powerful mobiliser of opinion was that 'black pupils have lower foreheads and less cranial capacity than the white pupils'. This turn-of-the-century gargantuan building had recently been changed from Cowper Street Primary School into a Middle School: the upgrading in name had not been matched in any way by upgraded facilities for the older children it was now to serve. To focus the criticism of the parents, members of the UCA and the Brotherhood helped set up the Chapeltown Parents' Action Group (CPAG). In taking this step the organisations established a principle sometimes thought to have been invented by white community workers - the 'empowerment' of community groups through self-organisation - but were in fact reaching back into a politics of self-liberation traceable through Toussaint L'Ouverture, Sojourner Truth, Nanny, WEB DuBois, Marcus Garvey, CLR James and Walter Rodney. (This is not idle name-calling: my copy of Rodney's liberation classic 'The Groundings with My Brothers'<sup>4</sup> was obtained from a bookstall at functions organised by these groups. A full demonstration of the continuity of these traditions within black politics is not possible here; for the CPAG and the Brotherhood, whose leading members migrated from St Kitts-Nevis, we would have to analyse the anti-colonial struggles in the late 1930's in those islands and link those events with the anti-slavery movements in Africa, the USA and the Caribbean. Books like Rodney's provide the written form of these memories, but of course many of them are orally transmitted.)

At a public meeting chaired by Mrs Odessa Stoute on Sunday 24 June 1973, the Action Group presented a list of educational demands on which are echoed in discussions nearly twenty years later :

- | to de-classify the School from a Middle to a Primary School
- | the removal of the headmaster
- | more Black governors "who are interested in their own people"
- | better contact between the headmaster, parents and staff
- | improved internal facilities in the school
- | attempts must be made to slow down the fast teacher turnover in the school
- | more black teachers
- | members of the Black community to be invited to speak to the children to give them more motivation
- | facilities and staff for extra teaching for the children in the evening<sup>5</sup>.

Similar demands had been unsuccessfully presented to the Council's Education Department at previous private meetings. The 24th June meeting publicly announced

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the next step that had been prepared by the Action Group : a strike by the students at Earl Cowper Middle School for Monday 25 June.

The school strike - unprecedented, so far as I know, in Leeds and extremely rare in the history of education in Britain - duly took place and was supported by almost all the parents and children (the majority of whom were black), who spent the day at a local church hall being taught by members of the Action Group. It sent out several shock waves. One of these was registered by the city's evening paper. Janet Buckton wrote: "I went (to the demonstration outside the school) with sympathy, understanding and clear acceptance that (that black parents') complaints could well be justified. But I came away enraged, angered and alarmed that the gap between black and white had visibly widened"<sup>6</sup>. A small group of white parents had gathered outside the school and engaged in arguments with the black adults at the picket line. The controversy was better revealed in letters to *Chapelton News*. Mrs Turner and Mrs Galli, two of the white parents, asked "Why were white parents excluded from the Action Group? After all, black and white kids are similarly disadvantaged by poor educational facilities at the school"<sup>7</sup>. It may seem ironic that white people, who have actively excluded black people for so long, express concern when they feel that they are being excluded by black people. But this issue, which had so upset Ms Buckton, remains at the heart of struggles by Caribbean people who live alongside white (and Asian) people in the inner city areas of Britain. Most white people involved in education today are less forthright than Mrs Turner and Mrs Galli (although some socialist organisations still persist in following these parents' conclusion: "This was clearly not an issue of races ... but of class"<sup>7</sup>) but the discomfort white educationalist feel at the supposed exclusivity of the black community still haunts their discussion. It is useful, therefore, to quote the Action Group's response in full<sup>7</sup>:

We have never attempted to exclude white parents from the Chapelton Parents' Action Group. Before calling the strike at Cowper Street School, we visited all the parents in the area, left leaflets, and explained what we were doing to the parents and invited them to support us. The response from white parents can be broken down into three categories:

- 1) a small number who were interested listened to us, read the leaflets and supported our action
- 2) a slightly larger group who have listened to us but who say that our action "won't do any good"
- 3) the vast majority who do not want to know. When we call on them they immediately tell us 'no coloured people live here'.

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Mrs Crombie, Mr Wenham and Mr Barrett called on Mrs Turner (at her home). They spent a long time in discussion with her. She expressed some concern about the reading ability of her child that attends Cowper Street School - the child was not reading as fluently as Mrs Turner expected. Mrs Turner promised to support our action by writing letters and attending meetings, but she said that she would not take any active part because of something that happened at Studley Grange<sup>8</sup>. We left our names, addresses and our telephone numbers and asked her to contact a member of the Action Group if she wished.

In carrying out a campaign which focused on the needs of black children, but which recognised that white children were also suffering the effects of poor education, and by inviting the support of white parents, the Action Group was close to one of the points made by Walter Rodney:

Recently there was a public statement in *Scope* where Black Power was referred to as 'Black Supremacy'. This may have been a genuine error or a deliberate falsification. Black Power is a call to black people to throw off white domination and resume the handling of their own destinies. It means that blacks would enjoy power commensurate with their numbers in the world and in particular localities<sup>9</sup>.

In fact, what was happening in 1973 was that a Caribbean community group, in developing 'power commensurate with its numbers', was offering to carry other groups along with it, so that all residents of Chapeltown would benefit. This process has been regularly repeated over the past sixteen years, with Caribbean groups taking the initiative and other groups making alliances with them, to the material benefit of everyone in Chapeltown<sup>10</sup>.

It did not feel as reasonable and moderate as this to the white establishment in Leeds. The degree of shock in the Educational Department can be gauged by its response to the strike and the demands raised by the Action Group. Speaking to a public meeting two days after the strike, Stuart Johnson, then Deputy Chief Education Officer, announced major concessions. The school would be re-equipped; in particular domestic science and craft facilities would be installed; more senior teaching posts would be established to allow for promotion within the school and hopefully reduce staff turnover; and 'expert, specialist' teachers would be brought in to remodel the curriculum and teach<sup>11</sup>.

A commentary on the meeting in the Brotherhood's newsletter 'Lookya' graphically portrays the militants' perspective:

The meeting began at 7.30pm with the information that the chief education officer, Mr Taylor, the man they wanted to see, had shortly

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gone to hospital with a heart attack. Oh Lawd! All the Black people start to feel guilty, plus the comfortable chairs and the wall to wall carpet [the meeting was held in the newly built Elmhurst School], and believing everything the education department officials said about the premises etc. But if you paint an old house nicely the dry rot and damp soon seeps through to expose the real issues. And so it came to pass that as the meeting dragged on and the room got stuffy, the revelations came forth.

The parents began to express their feelings and experiences not only with the school but also in dealing with the Education Department where everyone introduces him or herself as Mr Taylor. The Education Department admitted its complacency in relation to the Education of Black children and in particular Earl Cowper Middle School. They found that their hope of blinding the parents with their figures and highbrow talk could not work that night because the Black people had facts and figures which maybe they should not have, but which might give them a heart attack if they tried to deny their validity ...

The Black community is not against progress or improved methods of teaching. At this moment we are fighting for a better quality of education for our children and if the Education Department had our interests at heart they would have seen fit to involve the parents and the community of this important project. Instead they refer to EXPERTS! Experts on our lives? Can you dig? It is these experts who cause the percentage of Black children in Educationally Sub Normal schools to be higher than the percentage in normal schools<sup>12</sup>.

The meeting closed at 10.15pm. The Education Department ... refused to discuss (the headmaster) and the other maggots at that school in public. This they said could be done in private by appointment; this the parents intend to do<sup>13</sup>.

It became known a month or two later that the headmaster had been removed; in a typical face-saving formula, he was promoted, thereby further undermining the effort at a positive response by the Education Department.

Despite these reservations, the Action Group had fulfilled some of its demands. The removal of a Headteacher as a result of community protest is an extremely rare event and it is a demand which a local authority would normally concede only under extreme duress. This was a period of enormous stress for the Leeds city council Education Department, and were similar events to take place today, anger and recrimination would no doubt be the dominant mood on both sides. It is all the more necessary, then, that those who are employed by local education authorities, who want to make

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progressive change in the educational facilities for inner-city children, stand back and recognise what positive contributions are offered by black community struggles such as these. Instead of feeling angry and threatened by the critique offered by the black communities, educators, administrators and councillors should appreciate the value of the struggle being waged. The benefits of actions such as the Cowper Street Strike would include the following.

First, parents are demonstrating the strongest possible commitment not just to education (most parents will pay lip service to the value of education for their children) but to a good education, one which will help them achieve their highest aspirations. The attitude of the black parents in the Action Group can be vividly contrasted with those of at least two white parents in the same locality. In their letter to *Chapelton News*, Mrs Turner and Mrs Galli wrote: "Black parents are quoted as saying that they want their children to become doctors and lawyers, but how many working class children of any colour achieve these heights? Unrealistic aspirations are a stumbling block to anybody trying to make a better future for their children<sup>14</sup>". It seems that these white parents had adopted the dominant ideology - that working class children should be 'realistic' and 'know their place.' The black parents were challenging that supine 'realism'. For a long time it has been recognised that parental aspirations for, and encouragement of their children, play an important part in pupils' achievement rates, and interventions of this sort in the educational process should now be seen as a manifestation of positive attitudes.

Secondly, the skills that are being developed in community action of this kind are important in educational terms. Following the 'mass politics' approach of the black liberation movements, the organisers continually emphasised the active involvement of the widest numbers of people. In this they clearly succeeded - there was overwhelming support for the strike, and each stage of the campaign was conducted through well attended public meetings. Significant numbers of people improved their skills in decision-making, in setting aims and objectives and planning their implementation; in putting over their case in discussion with other people in the neighbourhood; in writing leaflets, letters, broadsheets; in running meetings and negotiating with the authorities ... no doubt the list can be extended. These citizenship skills are of course transferable to many other situations, and today's radical community development approach to education gives central importance to this kind of learning.

Thirdly, in a relatively small and well networked black community such as Chapelton's, these skills and attitudes are passed on quite directly from the parents and young activists to the next generation. (The contentious issue of what constitutes 'community' cannot be examined here.) Looking through the names of the black people associated with this campaign sixteen years ago, it is striking to notice that many of them are still closely involved in 'community' activities, and that their younger relatives are also involved. Some of the younger ones today have children of their own, and they are playing as active a part in their children's educational development

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as the generation before played in theirs. This knowledge is not simply passed on through the family interactions. Events such as the Cowper Street strike become embedded in the historical consciousness of the relatively cohesive community, and the awareness that has been developed by some becomes part of the oral resource available to others. Knowledge of events such as these is networked today primarily through the black youth and community workers, the pirate radio activists and the various campaign groups that spring up from time to time, and, judging from remarks made to me by people who are not closely connected with any of these groupings, historical information (not always entirely accurate) about past struggles is widely available<sup>15</sup>.

## **The Chapeltown Supplementary School**

There was one area of the Action Group's demands which was not met. The black parents were well aware that successful education for black children requires more than adequate physical facilities and an absence of overt racism among the staff. Demands for black governors, black teachers and better contact between the school and the black community were raised, with the important caveat that black governors should be "interested in their own people". The parents wanted governors (and they would have applied the stricture to black teachers) who were connected to the local black community, who would champion its needs within the school; in short they wanted radical, 'conscious' black teachers and governors. It is no surprise that this did not come about. Only in the recent Primary Needs Programme (PNP) has there been any real attempt to increase the input of black people into the school system in Leeds, and although the 'interested in their own people' criterion may have been applied in its softest form in the selection of these home/school and language support staff, there is little evidence that their impact has been significant, for reasons outside their control. This important work by Leeds City Council has been extensively evaluated by a team lead by Professor Robin Alexander and their report deserves widespread attention. A conclusion relevant to this article's discussion of the impact of black people on schools is "that home-school links was the forgotten PNP aim", characterised by an "absence of policy and (a) paucity of central support and initiatives"<sup>16</sup>.

But, twenty years ago, the Caribbean community was already tackling the problem of politically conscious education unencumbered by the support of the local authority. In 1971 the United Caribbean Association had established a Supplementary School which met every Saturday. Whereas the Cowper Street Strike had been an effort to change the state education system, the Supplementary School was an intervention of a different kind. As the Brotherhood put it in one of their broadsheets: "The demand for education has been made - we must proceed. Next is the question EDUCATION FOR WHAT? We leave this for the parents and community to decide"<sup>17</sup>. The Supplementary School was one type of answer to the Brotherhood's question; it was intended to challenge the nature of education which was being offered to black children in the state system, as well as mitigating the effects of poor standards of

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education and the racism within state schools. In an article for *Chapelton News*, the organisers wrote:

It was recognised that a Supplementary School was not the ultimate answer to the mis-education of Black children, but it was felt that something immediate had to be done, plus, it gave us an opportunity to get to know the children and help them develop a positive attitude towards themselves, also supplementing their academic skills ... The subjects we concentrate on are mathematics, Afro-Caribbean history and English<sup>18</sup>.

Basing themselves on the demands being made by black parents and using the skills of eighteen local black people, including some students from the University and Polytechnic, the Supplementary School, with 160 children on its register, was setting out to enhance the achievement and the consciousness of black children in and around Chapelton. The stress on a 'positive attitude' was a clear response to the debilitating effect of an educational environment which either derides or places little value on your past or present culture; and the inclusion of black history was not merely to fill the obvious gap in the state schools' curriculum but to start a process of political education among young people. The use of black teachers was an integral part of the strategy.

Supplementary Schools have been an ongoing feature of community life for most migrant groups throughout Britain - in Leeds, the Mosques and Temples run their own after-school education, the Chinese have a Saturday school, and there are at least two schools for Caribbean children, one of which sees itself in the 'conscious' tradition set by the UCA school, the other being based at a black church. It may seem paradoxical that very little support is given to these Schools by the Leeds Education Authority, since both the providers of supplementary schools and the authority share a common aim of enhancing the educational opportunities of the children of Leeds. An exercise carried out by the authority in 1989 revealed the existence of "at least 25 supplementary schools operating in Leeds" with nearly 3,000 children attending them. But the report to the Education Committee recommended a total grant of only £5,300 to all these schools, with no school recommended for more than £400<sup>19</sup>.

One explanation of this lack of support might be that the council is reluctant to fund an educational process which emphasises black identity and which may develop ideas which go beyond the Labour Party's version of socialism. There are countless examples of this attitude emanating from the council in recent years<sup>20</sup>. But not all the Supplementary Schools carry the overt political intentions of the original Caribbean Supplementary School in Leeds. So the council's reaction cannot be simply 'party-political'. Its arms-length approach to supplementary schools is partly based on a critique of the educational methods employed in the supplementary schools. I would argue, however, that the main reason why the council refuses to offer substantial

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support is that the Leeds educational establishment faces considerable difficulties in recognising the value of the 'self-help' approach to education. 'Self help', in either its radical or conservative forms, runs counter to the overwhelming aim of the councillors and their officers to control the citizens of the inner city. Self-organisation might challenge the council's impulse for hegemony over the working class populations of the city.

## **The national context : 1970's black struggles over education**

The events just described were not unique to Leeds. There was (and is today) ferment over educational issues in the black neighbourhoods throughout Britain. The black activists who were at the heart of the Cowper Street School Strike and the Supplementary School were in good contact with other black radicals throughout in Britain and they were, as we have seen, influenced by the writings of critical black academics like Coard and Rodney. It is well known, however, that militant ideologies on their own make little impact. These ideological positions were efforts to interpret and influence a panoply of injustices which were actively perceived by black people up and down the land. This is asserted here on the basis of what I have heard and seen over the past twenty years; the evidence presented may not be complete. I am aware, for instance, that my accounts of the Cowper Street School Strike and the Supplementary School rely heavily on the printed word. Most of these words have the great merit of having been written by the protagonists themselves; but they are not backed up by wider interviews or other materials, for the important reason that I was not in a position - because of my lack of experience and the particular political context in which these events were situated - to obtain the degree of trust that is required for this kind of research. On the other hand, having remained in Chapeltown since then, I have acquired further insight, in ways which are not documented here, into these and other events which give me the confidence to make some interpretive statements. The reader will judge for herself whether these interpretations are valid, and whether the materials I employ are sufficient to back up the claims.

For the national context in the 1970's I am relying on the writing in mid 1970's issues of *Race Today* magazine and my personal associations with some of the writers of that magazine. It is remarkable how little of this material has found its way into the major reviews of black experience in Britain which have been written by Ron Ramdin and Peter Fryer<sup>21</sup>. Ron Ramdin appears to prioritise the industrial struggle over 'community' based issues such as education (a topic not listed in his contents or index pages). Both books are lighthouses in uncharted seas and it may seem churlish to criticise their errors of detail, but it is important to emphasise the tenuous nature of the historical writing on which we build our current thinking and practice. Peter Fryer makes one indexed reference to education, quoting from A. Sivanadan's one page on education in his important article 'From Resistance to Rebellion'. This quote has the

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merit of stressing that black parents in Haringey (London) engaged in a "fight against categorisation of their children as underachieving" and suggests that this fight "spread to other areas and became incorporated into the programmes of black political organisations". Fryer omits Sivanadan's further useful reference to the supplementary schools that parents and activists went on to establish<sup>22</sup>. Ron Ramdin devotes only six of his 500 or so pages of history and analysis to education and while his one page reference to black political activity over this issue does refer to supplementary school activity he is merely summarising the information relayed by Sivanandan in the article which Fryer used. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that these writers regard the role of education in the black communities, and the struggle to transform its content, its organisation and its methods, as of marginal importance. (To add to the distress of those of us who regard the educational process as a much more significant site of struggle, and who live and work as far away from the metropolis as we can get, these writers seem oblivious to most black community activity, apart from so-called riot, which does not take place in London<sup>23</sup>.)

Yet there *is* information available on some of the struggles over education in black communities. Throughout the 1970's successive issues of *Race Today* covered educational issues (including a short report and photo of the Cowper Street School strike (July 1973)) and three issues stressed the importance the magazine attached to these protests by giving them front page treatment. There is space here for only the briefest account of *Race Today's* approach to this work. Farrukh Dhondy's article 'The Black Explosion in Schools' (February 1974) offered a theoretical approach unfamiliar to those sections of the white and black left who draw their inspiration from an industry-based marxism. Starting from the insight that the black young people leaving schools in the early 70's "refuse the work that society allocates them", he offered this interpretation :

Their rejection of work is a rejection of the level to which schools have skilled them as labour power, and when the community feeds that rejection back into the school system, it becomes a rejection of the functions of schooling ... In this context, the commodities normally associated with 'education', such as culture, critical awareness and so on, need to be re-examined. Education is a cultural weapon, the educative process of life in the black community becomes cultural action for freedom. To black people, culture means political freedom ... Blacks in schools form not so much a fighting force within the working class, but a force which has been forced to fight<sup>24</sup>.

The *Race Today Collective*, as it later named itself, was able to spell out this analysis because it was infused with CLR James' interpretation of Marx and Lenin<sup>25</sup>. It laid the basis for the formation of the Black Students' Movement and the Black Parents' Movement whose theory and practice was described in detail in the August 1975 and October 1976 editions of the magazine. The BSM and the BPM involved themselves in a series of actions (particularly in London) in which the close connection between

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the experience of young people in schools and on the streets - particularly when they come into contact with the police force - was continually emphasised, and they evolved a methodology which was designed to respond to the fissure between old and young within the Caribbean communities which was beginning to appear:

The emergence of these two organisations at this time is significant for many reasons. They represent a breakthrough in that, although their membership comes from two different generations of the working class, starting with different historical experiences, they have found common ground on which to fight about the breaking down of the old ideas of education and the building up of a new conception of education and society. The separation that has always been made between the police and the school, as though their functions are somehow unconnected, no longer holds water<sup>26</sup>.

In documenting these struggles around young people and education, in offering a theory which specifies an approach to the "building up of a new conception of education and society" and (see the October 1976 edition of the magazine) in giving a detailed account of the methods to be adopted (laying particular stress on the notion that *only* by basing the activity in the expressed needs of the people most affected can the campaign be effective), *Race Today* has left us with a series of texts which it would be foolish to continue to ignore.

## **Theory and practice in the 1980's**

One of the merits of the *Race Today Collective's* analyses was that it frequently re-evaluated the ideas and practices of the black movements from which it had grown. In common with virtually all political groups, its writing has the sharp tone which makes for fierce disagreement, but the views it advanced are usefully contrasted with those presented by most academics. The Collective's polemic against Supplementary Schools (August 1975) makes an interesting point about the danger of alienating black parents, but - as we have seen in the example from Leeds - this argument is highly specific to those London Supplementary Schools which were run by militant black nationalists. A view of more general and contemporary relevance is about the role of Black Studies within the school curriculum. Asking "in whose interest?" are these studies, *Race Today* argued :

It was with considerable ease that the 'black and proud' declaration permeated the schools ... School authorities latched onto the concept of Black Studies like a drowning man clutching a straw. They saw immediately that there was a not-to-be-missed opportunity to channel the chaos being created daily by black children in the classrooms ... the problem for them was how to implement it within the schools without losing even more control<sup>27</sup>.

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While Black Studies as such has been effectively sidelined by the demand that schooling is carefully connected with (white) Britishness by the advent of the National Curriculum, despite articulate protest from Beverley Naidoo and others<sup>28</sup>, the issue is still alive within Adult, Further and Higher Education where academics and administrators feel obliged to create curricula which are - or which they imagine to be - meeting the needs of black students. The question of the precise interests that are being served by these courses remains as open - but less politically focused - as it was in the mid 1970's.

Maureen Stone's *The Education of the Black Child in Britain*<sup>29</sup> provides an important bridge between the activity around education by black parents and the academic study of black children's achievement. Stone's book fulfils all the demands of academic scholarship and she makes a careful claim that her research design "should offer some control on any tendency towards bias or subjectivity" (pp90-91), but her tiny reference to the "idea of the researcher as a resource" (p90), and her exposition of the ideas of black consciousness, negritude, Black Power and Rastafarianism are some of the indications that this book is more than a piece of 'impartial' research. I read it as an assault from within the black community in Britain on the implicitly racist assumptions of much academic research about black children in white-run schools in Britain and America.

Maureen Stone makes a systematic and documented refutation of a view, which still commands respect among some teachers and some black parents, that the reason for the lower examination achievement rates of Caribbean pupils compared to white and Asian children of Indian or Pakistani descent is the low self-concept of pupils of Caribbean origin. She quotes research which contradicts those studies which have shown high measures of 'self hate' amongst black American children; she makes a convincing rebuttal of Coard and Bagley's research which showed that higher proportions of black British children wanted to change their skin colour than white British children; she quotes research which shows that black girls have no significant difference in self esteem scores from white girls; but, nevertheless, she says, the research she reviews on British children's comparative self esteem scores is "generally inconclusive and contradictory" (p62). Overall, however, her own research in comprehensive schools engaged in multi-racial education projects and in Supplementary Schools, and her review of the literature, leads her to the following conclusion:

When we examined the literature on black self concept we saw that, before any research was carried out, the impression, and the theory based on the impression, was that there was no possible basis for the development of a healthy self-image amongst black people. After the mid 1960's, research began to show blacks having positive self-concept. The fact is, as we have tried to show in our discussion of black culture and consciousness, people derive the means to sustain a sense of self from among many sources and do not rely on negative and hostile views as their source of information about self.

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We should not therefore be surprised to find a normal/average distribution of self-concept scores amongst black children in Britain. (p233)

Maureen Stone's review of three self-help and four officially-funded supplementary education projects in London reveals a strong emphasis amongst the black parents whose children they served, and amongst the black teachers who staff the projects, on the teaching of basic skills. Where aspects of the 'Black Studies' approach was found, this was subordinated to the principal aim of ensuring that black children advance their reading, writing and mathematical skills. Her research demonstrates "that the [black] Community groups are very successful in encouraging children to develop positive (if instrumental) attitudes to [mainstream] school ...[they] have higher aspirations than children in other groups" (p238). Having refuted the idea that poor self concept is the cause of lower rates of academic achievement among pupils of Caribbean origin, she concludes : "The central recommendation of this study is for the use of more formal methods of teaching West Indian children throughout primary and secondary schools" (p242).

While her assault on the self-concept theories, her critique of multi-racial education and her evaluation of the supplementary schools are convincing, and her demonstration that black children have, in general, positive self concepts is of fundamental importance, it seems to me that she places too much weight on her central recommendation. To argue for a different emphasis, I want to recall the political struggles waged by Chapeltown's black parents and to very briefly compare these with the struggle against Ray Honeyford in Bradford.

It is salutary for academics whose careers are based on research into the success and failure rates of black pupils to review the proposal made by the Chapeltown Parents' Action Group in 1973 (listed on pages 6 - 7 above). They propose changes in the resourcing of the school, changes in the ethnic composition of the staff and governing body, changes in attitude (to improve motivation) and a change in leadership in the school. Although there was in 1973, even more strongly expressed than you hear today, a body of opinion among concerned black parents which argued that the more formal teaching methods they recall from their own experience in the Caribbean should be implemented in Chapeltown's schools, this was not a demand raised by the Action Group. The Group's recommendations, though expressed in general terms, are remarkably consistent with the recommendations made by many mainstream educationalists, including those in the Swann Report<sup>30</sup>. Clearly, the implications of the Group's position are far more radical than those proposed by Swann et al; the position at least of the most radical members of the Group is better summarised in *Race Today's* formulation : "breaking down old the ideas of education and the building up of a new conception of education and society"<sup>31</sup>. The merits of this approach are that it never loses sight of the fact that effective progress in education is inseparable from radical changes in society as a whole; and that the approach to change in education

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has to be many-sided : a number of changes have to be made in parallel with each other.

This leads to a discussion of the strategic major weakness in the campaign against Ray Honeyford, the headteacher of Drummond Middle School in Bradford. (There is no space here to discuss the Campaign's major theoretical problem : its failure to provide an adequate account of the relationship between arguments about 'culture' and arguments about racism.) In March 1984 Ray Honeyford was accused of racism and was ousted from his job (he accepted a lump sum of £70,900, plus an index linked £6,500 per annum, in taking early retirement) after sustained public protest over 21 months<sup>32</sup>. It is interesting to note that one of the early marches organised by the Drummond Parents' Action Group included representatives from the Bradford West Indian Parents' Association (at least one of whose members was once in the Race Today Collective), but the campaign was primarily composed of Muslim and white parents of children at Drummond School, the Bradford Asian Youth Movement, the local Community Relations Council, the Bradford Council of Mosques, some far left activists and, in shifting alliances, some Bradford City councillors. Mark Halstead<sup>33</sup> reviews these events in considerable - if somewhat detached and textually-based - detail and there is no space here to provide a proper commentary. My judgements are severely limited by reliance on my memory of the events and on sources quoted by Halstead, but it would appear that the campaign against Honeyford, unlike the Chapeltown Parents' Action Group, was unable to offer a sustained critique of the educational processes in Drummond Middle School, confining itself instead to the demand for the removal of the headteacher. This is not to attach blame to the campaign. The alliance it assembled was so politically diverse that it is remarkable that it managed to maintain itself at all. No doubt within the campaign there were individuals and groups who would have attempted to broaden the debate and make wider proposals for change. But it appears to be the case that the forces opposing Honeyford became so enmeshed in the argument about Honeyford's alleged racism that they were unable, or unwilling, to enter the debate about what was actually happening inside the school, and make across-the-board recommendations for a new approach to education within Drummond Middle School. In fact, so far as I can see, the campaign never spelled out precisely how Honeyford's views actually influenced the experience of pupils within the school, nor was evidence produced to show that the educational attainment of pupils at Drummond fell significantly below the attainment of similar cohorts of pupils at other Middle School. It may be that the campaign did not have access to this kind of information - although parents are often capable of making informed judgements on the former point, if not the latter - but any educational campaign that fails to address the wider educational issues must be open to question. The Drummond Parents' Action Group seems, by default, to imply that simply changing a headteacher will create an improved education for black children. This position is as disputable as Maureen Stone's view that the central issue is teaching methods.

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## **Conclusion**

In reviewing some of the material struggles of black students and parents to obtain an education which meets their needs in modern Britain, and in drawing attention to some of the writings by theoretically and politically informed black writers on this subject, I have sought to substantiate a number of points. First of all, there is a pressing need for the hidden history of the lives of the black settlers, formerly largely working class men and women, to be revealed and analysed. This article has concentrated on some of this history in relation to education. But there is a more general point. This history is needed partly for its own sake, but mainly because, in my view, effective change in social practice will only take place if it is founded on the recognition that twenty or thirty years ago the practical and theoretical conclusions drawn by those settlers from their experience here is the proper starting point for a discussion of the changes that are needed in British society.

The second point is that even this preliminary account reveals that there is scope for major disagreement about the policy implications of the positions reached by the various groupings whose activity has been reviewed here. The Alliance of Black Parents and Students formed around *Race Today* always argued, more or less openly, that major, probably revolutionary, changes were needed in society before a really effective education would be available for black people. The Chapeltown Parents' Action Group included people loosely linked with *Race Today*, other militants who were more Afro-centric and others who probably did not consider themselves highly 'political'. They derived the most far-reaching programme of practical reform that I have encountered anywhere, but restricted the discourse of wider social change to a sub-text. Maureen Stone, on the other hand, though probably not rejecting the CPAG's programme, simply advocates traditional teaching methods as the most important change needed. The Drummond Parents' Action Group narrowed the debate still further by only demanding the removal of a headteacher. These differences - reflecting differences both in practical experience and in theoretical assumptions - should be welcomed and actively debated.

My third point relates to the rôle of students, teachers and policy makers. An earlier version of this article included a discussion of some of the recent research on black pupils' achievement<sup>34</sup>. I argued that Smith and Tomlinson's The School Effect might be interpreted as offering an academic under-pinning of at least one of the central arguments made by black parents and pupils over the past few decades : what teachers and systems of educational practice *actually do* makes a real difference to the levels of achievement of children. Unlike the white parents who argued against the activities of the Chapeltown Parents' Action Group, black parents have not, in the main, accepted the conventional wisdom that your class position determines your

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educational achievement. While Smith and Tomlinson held back from definitively asserting that certain types of school organisation made for better results, for pupils of the same class and colour, than other types, this conclusion certainly strikes true to the reported experience of many black parents and pupils. Why, then, has it taken so long for the academics to come to this conclusion? Partly because the research is long and complex. Mainly, I would argue, because too much reliance is placed upon academically respectable processes, and too little is placed upon a process of engagement with the lives and struggles of the parents and pupils inside the school system.

Finally, one theme of this article needs emphasising once more. Every effort to record and interpret social action is fraught with methodological problems. Throughout this piece I have sought to make clear the limitations of my own ability to comprehend the words and activities I have included. Frequently a different impulse can be detected - my own imperative for progressive social action - and this overtakes the hermeneutic caution that I profess. These dilemmas remain at the heart of social thought and political action, counselling both modesty and defiance.

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1991-1992

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## **NOTES**

- 1 I subscribe to the view that 'race' is an ideologically loaded, socially constructed term which has no scientific status. See Miles, Robert Racism and Migrant Labour (RKP, 1982). I follow Miles' use of inverted commas around the word to indicate a refusal to legitimate its claimed status.
- 2 Stone, Maureen The Education of the Black Child in Britain - the Myth of Multi-racial Education (Fontana, 1981)
- 3 The 'Brotherhood' was an organisation composed of men and women. The irony, and the politics, of the name was not, so far as I know, commented on at the time.

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- 4 Walter Rodney The Groundings with my Brothers (Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, 1969). The publisher founded one of the first black bookshops in Britain, trading today in West London under the name 'Walter Rodney Bookshop', and helping to provide from the late sixties to the present day some of the educational materials that have shaped radical black consciousness.
- 5 *Chapelton News* No.9, July 1973, written from notes I took at the meeting and checked by the Action Group. *Chapelton News* is available at the Local History section of Leeds City Library.
- 6 *Yorkshire Evening Post* 26 June 1973. In a private reply to my (unprinted) response to her article, Ms Buckton revealed much about white newspaper reporters' attitudes: "Nothing was ever gained by bitterly harping on the past. The people who demonstrated were Leeds people with what I personally thought was a genuine grievance. Why get touchy about colour? ... I am not anti-black. If I may use that well-worn phrase - some of my best friends are ...!"
- 7 *Chapelton News* No 10, August 1973.
- 8 This is probably a reference to the dispute over control of the Studley Grange Children's Centre on Leopold Street in Chapelton. In late 1972 an organisation of Chapelton black parents democratically ejected the white committee of mainly middle class liberals from the suburbs, who up till then, were running the Centre. Mrs Turner's friend Mrs Galli was one of the two local white people on the deposed Committee. See *Chapelton News* No 1, October 1972, and No 3, December 1972. (It is hard to convey in an academic journal the *feel* of these community conflicts. 'Black Power' was an accurate term. The black people expressed themselves extremely powerfully. White people who thought they were 'doing good for black people' were astonished and hurt when told that they weren't.)
- 9 Walter Rodney, *op cit*, p24.
- 10 I have written about this elsewhere. See Farrar, Max (aka Paul Holt) Riot and Revolution - the politics of an inner city *Revolutionary Socialism - the Journal of Big Flame* (Winter 1981-2) and Farrar, Max The Politics of Black Youth Workers in Leeds *Critical Social Policy* Issue 23, Autumn 1988.
- 11 *Chapelton News* No 9, July 1973.
- 12 At Action Group meetings duplicated sheets of advice on how parents could enhance the educational attainment of their children, based on contemporary professional opinion, were circulated. Bernard Coard's pamphlet on black children in 'educationally subnormal' schools was on sale. Coard, with a

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Sussex University MA and two years teaching experience in ESN schools in London, had written an academically impeccable, blistering attack on the ESN system, which underlined much of the Action Group's approach to the 'normal' schools attended by black children. See Coard, Bernard How the West Indian Child is made educationally sub-normal in the British school system (New Beacon Books, 1971). New Beacon Books, the other pioneer of black publishing, still provides an unparalleled resource in north London.

- 13 *Lookya News* (no date - probably July 1973). A later issue said: "The Education Dept is still playing games. Chapeltown Parents Action Group continues. It is important that the Action Group continues and it is important that more parents become actively involved. It is also important that the parents see their struggle in this community in relation to the international struggle of Black people, of which we are a part". *Lookya News* (no date - probably October 1973) published by West Indian Afro Brotherhood.
- 14 *Chapeltown News* No 10, August 1973
- 15 See Farrar, Max op cit (1988) for some evidence for this view. The Chapeltown-based organisation 'African Emphasis' issued a current affairs magazine programme on Chapeltown's community radio 'West Yorkshire Broadcasting Corporation' on 15 July 1989 but the black community radios in Leeds have not been successful in their efforts to broadcast news on a regular basis.
- 16 Alexander, Robin Primary Education in Leeds (University of Leeds, 1991) page 140. This report is currently the property of Leeds City Council, but Professor Alexander has issued a briefing paper based on the report which is available from the School of Education, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT, and the report is the basis of his forthcoming publication Policy and Practice in Primary Education (Routledge). The Leeds City Council Primary Needs Programme makes a fascinating study in the way in which 'race' and racism is encoded in official policy. Nowhere in the stated aims of the PNP is there any mention of 'race', 'ethnic minority' or discrimination. Yet the policy was heavily biased towards schools with a high proportion of black pupils, and the non-teaching support staff employed as part of the programme were black. And, within the programme, Alexander says that "the Authority displayed a clear commitment to meeting the needs of children from ethnic minority groups, to combatting racism, and to extending multi-cultural understanding". But his evaluation is damning : "Notwithstanding the generally good quality of what was provided by the LEA, the actual scale of professional support remained inadequate to the task. Provision was patchy, and professional attitudes ranged from a sensitive understanding of the issues to the blandly ignorant. Some staff failed to distinguish between ethnic minority and multi-cultural needs, and as a result

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refused to acknowledge their obligations in respect of the latter" (Alexander, op cit, p132).

- 17 *Lookya News* (no date - probably October 1973) published by West Indian Afro Brotherhood.
- 18 *Chapelton News* No 18, July 1974. The article begins with a list of examples of poor achievement and teacher racism. It includes a reference to Coard: "Any doubts we may have had concerning Black children in schools evaporated with Bernard Coard's 'How the West Indian child in made ESN by the British school system'".
- 19 Leeds City Council, Education Committee, 27.11.89 Supplementary Schools in Leeds. A detailed investigation of the experiences of children of Chinese origin in Leeds' schools can be found in Mike Simpson .....
- 20 Farrar, Max The politics of black youth workers (1988) op cit
- 21 Fryer, Peter Staying Power - the history of black people in Britain (Pluto Press, 1984). Ramdin, Ron The Making of the Black Working Class in Britain (Wildwood House, 1987. Moore, Robert Racism and Black Resistance in Britain (Pluto Press, 1975) has the merit of using the resources provided by *Race Today* but similarly omits to discuss struggles around education.
- 22 Fryer, Peter op cit, p 399. Sivanandan's article From resistance to rebellion : Asian and Afro-Caribbean struggles in Britain is to be found in *Race and Class* XXIII/2-3 (Autumn 1981-Winter 1982) and in his A Different Hunger (Pluto Press, 1982). Fryer's marvellous book occasionally gets things wrong. Referring to Chapelton, Leeds, he tells us that "a disabled Sikh woman was burnt to death when a petrol bomb was thrown into her house" (Peter Fryer, op cit, p 396.). He cites *Race and Class* Vol XXIII/2-3, as his source. The relevant sections of this issue of *Race and Class* provide an interesting example of how historians can subtly shift the weight of their own evidence. The journal re-prints an excerpt from *Searchlight* which, amongst other items, includes a summary of an article I wrote for the Chapelton community paper *Come-Unity News*, and which was re-printed in *Leeds Other Paper* (24.7.81). This article noted the death of an elderly Sikh woman in a fire at her house, reported the view of a local man that a petrol bomb had been thrown into the house and explained that the police said that there was no such evidence. All this is reported in *Race and Class*, but at the start of the summaries from *Searchlight*, there appears the following : "From the murder of Charles Wootton in Liverpool in 1919 to the burning of families in New Cross, Walthamstow and Leeds this year, black people had to contend with racial violence". A possible interpretation of this, when taken with the summary a couple of pages further

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on in the journal, is that *Race and Class* believed that the Sikh woman was the victim of racist attack. That is the conclusion that Peter Fryer clearly came to. But, as reported in *Come-Unity News* (No 4, September 1981), the Coroner rejected this idea, even though it was thoroughly argued by Sunil Saggar, the barrister representing the family concerned. Subsequently a member of the family told me that he took the view that the most probable cause of death was accidental. All this should heighten our caution over the use of 'source' material.

- 23 Even our 'riots' get cursory and incorrect mention. The first documented, semi-organised, major physical confrontation between black youths and the police in Britain took place on Bonfire Night (5th November) 1975 in Chapeltown, Leeds. See Farrar, Max Riot and Revolution (1981-2) op cit. In what is presumably a reference to this event, ("violent collective conflict between Blacks and the police") Ron Ramdin says that it took place at Carnival (ie the August Bank Holiday) and he overlooks the specificity of this event by eliding it with the Mangrove demonstration in 1971.
- 24 *Race Today* February 1974, pp 45-6
- 25 Statues to Marx and Lenin may well have toppled, but no-one who reads CLR James' work with any seriousness can argue that their tradition will die. His main theoretical work is Notes and Dialectics (first published 1948, Alison and Busby 1980). An easier read is Facing Reality first published 1958, Bewick Editions, 1974) or his essays (three volumes, Alison and Busby, 1977,1980, 1984). Paul Buhle CLR James - the artist as revolutionary (Verso 1988) is one of the few books about James, though the chapter on James in Cedric Robinson's Black Marxism (Zed Press, 1983) is excellent.
- 26 *Race Today* August 1975, p186
- 27 *ibid*, p185
- 28 Beverley Naidoo criticises the national curriculum history working group's interim report for marginalising the experience of black people in British history. Naidoo, Beverley Past masters (Times Educational Supplement, 20.10.89, p25). The history syllabus now issued by the National Curriculum Council provides some space for those of us who want to critically examine the history of black-white relations, but Conservative Party ideology of 'race' is firmly imprinted in the document.
- 29 Maureen Stone, op cit

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- 30 *Race Today* August 1975, p186
- 31 Education for All (The Swann Report) HMSO 1985, Cmnd 9453
- 32 Halstead, Mark Education, Justice and Cultural Diversity - an examination of the Honeyford affair, 1984-5 (The Falmer Press, 1988) provides an extremely detailed and readable account of the events and the philosophical issues raised. Another account, which Halstead criticises, by a black academic based in Bradford is : Olivia Foster-Carter The Honeyford Affair in Barry Troyna (ed) Racial Inequality in Education (Tavistock, 1988)
- 33 Halstead, *ibid*
- 34 I referred primarily to : Smith, David J and Tomlinson, Sally The School Effect - a study of multi-racial comprehensives (Policy Studies Institute, 1989) and Drew, David and Gray, John The black-white gap in examination results : a statistical critique of a decade's research *New Community* 17(2), January 1991, p 163

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