

West Indians and school

Joanna Mack

Under-achievement in class is seldom something with a simple cause. West Indian parents are dissatisfied, their culture ignored. Self-help is gaining ground.

"Derick was a dunce. I love him but it's true," says Sylvia Nelson, who came to live in Deptford, south London, from the West Indies in the sixties. Derick, her nine year old son, was doing badly at school. "I tried to help him sometimes," says Mrs Nelson, who also has five other children to look after and works the night shift in the local biscuit factory. "I taught him how to spell his name Derick. But they told him at school, Derek, and he got in a muddle."

In Deptford, a supplementary school ran for a year, giving children of West Indian and African origin extra help on top of their normal schooling. Derick went along. "At first he was a bit scared," his mother says. "But when he found people love him and spend time to teach him, he gained a lot of confidence in himself. He started to learn to sign his name, count up to 50 then 100, then start to spell. Little by little to pick up, then go on. He wasn't afraid of the people and they didn't rough him. I was very pleased with the school and I was very sorry when it ended. But he was sorry even more, and has one of his books under his pillow, and he sits and looks and he laments."

Derick was failing at school, but yet he was capable of learning much. Most West Indians, while stressing that some of their children do well at school, believe that substantial numbers of their children are under-achieving, though perhaps not to the same extent as Derick.

"The black people have trusted the teachers and the education authorities but they have not served us well," says Mrs Ambrozian Neal, whose children go to school in Brent, north London, and who is general secretary of the Association for Black Education Advance.

There are probably around 125,000 to 150,000 pupils of West Indian parents in state schools, out of a total school population of nine million or so. The West Indian children are heavily concentrated in a few education authorities—mainly in London.

Are, then, the West Indian children doing any worse than others? Ashton Gibson, who runs West-Indian Concern, a self-help organisation working with families in north London, argues: "West Indians predominantly fall within the low social economic group who do very badly in the school system. Most working class kids because they're born here and are part of the system accept certain roles, and ambitions are more realistic. And here we have West Indian parents who are expecting the school system to turn out kids with great achievements."

This view that West Indian children's low achievement is just part of the wider problem of children in disadvantaged areas has until recently guided the education authorities. But the thinking of those in charge is shifting.

Roy Truman, the Inner London Education Authority inspector responsible for work with socially and culturally deprived children, argues that, besides general educational disadvantage, "there is something in the education system that acts less favourably to West Indian children." No statistics have been collected on ethnic minorities in schools since 1973 (though many people now

favour collection again). From subjective judgments, Truman says: "Their overall level of achievement probably is not as great."

Certainly, very many West Indians seem highly dissatisfied. They feel their children are generally doing badly, many are unfairly suspended from school, and many are dumped in schools for the "educationally subnormal" (ESN schools).

There are younger West Indians who no longer trust the education system. White society has, they feel, had such a consistently poor record on race—it even vetoes economic sanctions on South Africa—that there's no reason to assume it will do anything to change schools' "racist" structures.

However, the large majority of West Indians I talked to thought that racial prejudice itself played only a small part in the problems West Indian children face in schools. Most of the complaints about discrimination seem to concern discipline.

Matthew, a 13 year old West Indian, went to a comprehensive school in Brent. He had always done well at school. He had never caused trouble. His school report said his conduct was "good" and his attendance and punctuality "good." Then, one day early last May, Matthew had a fight.

His account is as follows. A white boy came and pushed him on the stairs for no reason at all. He hit back, and a fight started. A young teacher came and hit him. He took the teacher to be a girl in the white boy's class and kicked her back. Matthew was suspended, but the white boy was not even sent to see the headmaster.

By the summer, Matthew was still not back at school, and his parents asked the local community relations council for help. The boy was subsequently offered a place in another school in October—having missed five months' schooling. The community relations council wants an inquiry. The chief education officer of Brent, Miss G. M. Rickus, says: "I've made my own inquiries, and I'm satisfied there was no evidence of discrimination." But to satisfy others, the investigations need to be open.

Matthew's case is not isolated. I was told by West Indians of incidents in other parts of London where black children were disciplined, but not the white.

But if West Indian children's under-achievement is not usually a result of simple prejudice, what is the reason? Mrs Neal says: "It's not a matter of picking on you' cause you're black, though there is a lot of this. It's that white people are ignorant." Bev Woodroffe, the ILEA inspector for community relations, has often seen instances of "clumsiness" by teachers: "They just do not understand cultural differences. Nor do they understand the hurt a casual remark can make to a beleaguered minority—like patronising remarks about people's hairstyles, or relating someone in a book on the third world to a child in the class."

When teachers do not know about the cultural backgrounds of their pupils, they will not fully gain the pupil's interest. Eva Davidson, a West Indian parent living in Brent who taught in the West Indies but couldn't get a teaching job here, says: "Knowing about the kids is just left aside, instead

of saying cultural backgrounds differ and it's up to you as an educationist to get to know about the child."

Teachers' lack of knowledge leads to a stereotyped view of West Indian pupils. Woodroffe says that it is "very clear that the expectations teachers have of West Indian children is very low." Eva Davidson, says: "If our children manage to get a CSE, as far as the teacher is concerned that's a great achievement. If they get a grade one, they're a genius. If the child manages to pass an O level, he's different, distinct. I tell you: if that child is achieving, no more is he black."

Mrs Hortence Jacobs, who lives in north Lewisham, recalls that her girl was ambitious for a good job. But "the teacher told her to do typing, he brought her down instead of pushing her up." The children at school consequently don't try hard. Nel Clark, a West Indian primary school teacher in Southwark, says: "My girl's teacher says she's doing well. But they are not thinking can she do better. I know she does better work at home. Lots of the West Indian children can give far more. But they only give what's expected."

West Indians coming into school find "correct" behaviour more difficult, because the school and teachers are geared to children who have grown up by the rules, customs and expectations of white families. Rita Redhead, a West Indian teacher who takes remedial classes in an Islington school, explains: "West Indian children are accustomed to a different, more formal, kind of discipline at home, and therefore cannot accommodate at school." Some West Indians worry that British schools are too liberal. Ashton Gibson says: "West Indian parents bring up their children in fear of themselves. Children are brought up in this country by encouraging more of a spirit of independence and self-restraint. Therefore teachers who haven't got any more sanctions but words are in an awkward position in dealing with West Indian youngsters."

Redhead argues further that West Indian children are being placed in ESN schools largely because their teachers find them "difficult socially." Many West Indians believe their children are being placed in ESN schools on the basis of rushed assessments, with culturally biased tests. Monica Lax, education officer of Brent community relations council, says: "My personal observation is that many of the West Indian children are being unfairly placed with children from the indigenous group who have some sort of medical or psychiatric handicap. Some of the West Indian children were doing better work than children in normal comprehensive schools but they are not followed up."

Donald Hills, Brent's chief educational psychologist, says the authority always "checks and double-checks" before recommending a West Indian child to an ESN school, makes the assessment "as broad as possible," and tries to review each child annually. More generally, chief education officers of areas with sizeable immigrant populations have told the Department of Education that, though there are no statistics, their clear impression is that the number of West Indian children entering ESN schools is beginning to decline.

The committee inquiring into special education, under Mary Warnock, reports next year. More integration of mild ESN schools with normal schools would at least decrease the bitterness among West Indian parents caused by their children being separated from normal schools. But the large numbers of West Indian children in ESN schools need to be seen as part of the general issue of West Indian

children's under-achievement. A child doing badly at school and lacking confidence, may sink down to the bottom of the class, and from there out.

West Indian parents have not known how the school system works, and what is expected of them. Gloria Cameron, of the West Indian Parents' Action Group in Lambeth, says: "We believed that the education system here worked like the one we left back home. But there, there was a smaller community, easier for the teachers to know you, and the teachers seemed more dedicated. Parents coming here didn't realise their participation was important." Consequently, the West Indian parents get out of touch with how their children are really doing at school, a problem made worse by the teachers' low expectations.

The first a West Indian parent may know of their child doing badly, by their higher standards, is when they fail their exams or are not allowed to enter O levels. Gloria Cameron comments: "Then the parents panic and try to get private tuition."

Nel Clark says: "Parents were approaching me a lot in the early seventies and, knowing I'm a teacher, would say: can you find someone to give my child private tuition as he can't read? Even people I met for the first time would ask." From this, came the Dachwyng Parents' Association in Peckham. Since 1974, this West Indian parents' group has been running a supplementary school each Saturday for 50 to 60 children. The parents help run the school and finance it. The children do extra reading and maths, and have informal chats about the West Indies. Clark says: "Children, whether good or bad, come. We don't want to put more labels on them."

Black and white: Drawings below and on the cover are by children from Ravenstone Junior School, south London



Simon Key, 8 years old

The association has just started classes for parents on modern methods of teaching. Throughout London, West Indian parents have formed action groups. Some run courses for parents and over half a dozen run supplementary schools.

The West Indian community has only slowly turned to self-help. Gloria Cameron, who is also community development officer for Lambeth community relations council, argues: "I came here from Jamaica and was told West Indians were all one ethnic group—but we're not. I'd never met a Barbadian until I came here. The cultures are diverse and because of this they won't pool their money." The West Indians are not economically independent. "In the islands it's the Cypriots, Jews and Chinese who do all the commerce," Gloria Cameron says. "The West Indians have always gone for the white-collar jobs. Those businesses that are West Indian are more likely [than businesses of other ethnic minorities] to employ a white person. They feel it brings better business and prestige. They don't quickly give money for projects. This makes us tremendously dependent on white society."

Perhaps because of the fragmentation, the West Indians do not seem to have been able to articulate their needs to the white authorities as sharply as other minority groups. Truman says that, for example, the Greek Cypriots have been in very close contact with ILEA, making it much easier to respond to their needs. However, Truman says it is not possible to make broad statements on how West Indian children are doing, compared to children of other ethnic minorities like (say) the Bangladeshis.

Contacts between the West Indian community and the education authorities and Department of Education have been growing—particularly in the last year. But down at the level of individual schools, the gap between teachers and the West Indian community does not often seem to be bridged. There are two major consequences.

First, many teachers do not recognise that the West Indian community is so dissatisfied. Joy Leitch, a teacher training lecturer at North East London Polytechnic, says: "When I go into a school, I might find half the staff unsympathetic. Teachers tend to say I'm just making up a problem."

Secondly, even those liberal teachers, who realise they must cater for the needs of children from minority groups, can blunder into mistakes. Trevor Carter, a teacher in a Hackney boys' comprehensive and chairman of the Caribbean Teachers' Association, says: "Well-meaning teachers say I must do something on the Caribbean. Then they talk about bananas, white sands and blue skies and sing the *Banana Boat Song* and *Yellow Bird*. But it isn't a relevant education. These kids are urban kids."

The lessons can be condescending, and even damaging. The Lambeth action group is complaining bitterly to the ILEA about a book used in some of the local schools. The parents feel that the book, *Natty Dread*, is uncritical in its presentation of Rastafarianism (the religious cult which regards Haile Selassie, the late emperor of Ethiopia, as the Messiah). Gloria Cameron says: "This particular book is not the sort of material we want our children to be using. Rastafarianism is a cult that was not very much regarded in the Caribbean, because of some of its beliefs and because of its conflict with the law. And so parents feel it could go quite a long way in alienating their youngsters from society." Truman comments that the book was produced by one enthusiastic teacher, and sent to a few local schools for trial until January.

Schools can learn much from the relatively few projects already under way. Supplementary schools—both those run by parents groups and the more official schools like Deptford which was set up by Lewisham council—seem successful. At Deptford, most of the 25 children who came started with a very negative image of themselves. When they drew a self-portrait, the picture would be of a white child, with blonde hair. By the end of the year, the children had gained more confidence and self-respect.

There were a number of important features. The lessons and materials reflected the children's backgrounds. There were black teachers and organisers. Parents were very closely involved. And there were five teachers to 25 pupils.

In Waltham Forest, north east London, the council set up in 1970 a West Indian supplementary service. The 28 teachers attached to the service each work in one particular school four days a week helping West Indian children. The groups are small and they work with all sorts of children. The materials used are based on the West Indian culture. Significantly fewer West Indian children are now being referred to ESN schools.

But supplementary services—though important as a temporary fill-in while schools are failing West Indian pupils—do not tackle the root of the problem. Namely: changing the thinking of the schools.

Ravenstone junior school, in Balham, in south London, did manage such a change. The ILEA is starting a project, based on Ravenstone's "whole school" concept, in primary and secondary schools in Lambeth. The school is an ordinary, old redbrick school and up to 1974 had ordinary teachers, not particularly committed to helping the large numbers of children from ethnic minorities. The school was asked to join the Schools Council's project on multi-racial education. The school staff, with some stimulation from outside, re-thought their approach.

Now, up on the walls and in the classrooms and library, are pictures and materials from the West Indies and Asia, as well as Britain. The children's self-portraits reflect the racial balance.

In all subjects, the implications of having children from different ethnic minorities are thought about. The head, Freddie Dale, says: "It's very difficult in maths, though we try to use more relevant examples, like flying planes to Jamaica. In drama and dance we use all styles, in music different rhythms and styles, and poetry from different countries. We now have a very wide range of study under 'World Religions,' and we try to take account of other festivals." The handwriting system the school used produced work cards with English nursery rhymes only. So one of the teachers wrote out West Indian poems onto the handwriting cards.

Brenda Brown, a teacher at the school, admits: "It's changed my attitude to what I do in the classroom and the way I choose my work. I now consider the children."

The teachers are careful not to present a demeaning view of the children's backgrounds. While I was there, Pauline Harper was teaching a lesson on the water closet as part of the project on health. One of the children commented that when they had been back to the West Indies some places just had holes in the ground. In answering the teacher drew comparison with parts of southern Europe, to try to avoid being patronising, and presenting the European white as best.

Ravenstone changed without much money, books or materials being pumped in. All schools could do the same tomorrow.

The politics of need

Tony Lynes

All our social services have ghosts of the past in their present machinery. Here we look at how the first national assistance scale was worked out in 1934.

In January 1935, a new form of aid to the unemployed came into being. It was called unemployment assistance and administered by the Unemployment Assistance Board. In due course the UAB became the NAB and, in its latest reincarnation, the Supplementary Benefits Commission—responsible now for means-tested assistance to the old, the sick, unsupported mothers and other groups in need, as well as to the unemployed. But the unemployed were the first to be taken out of the Poor Law into a national assistance scheme.

Before the scheme could commence, the UAB had the task of working out a scale of needs on which allowances to the unemployed were to be based. The Minister of Labour had power to amend the board's proposals before asking parliament to approve them—but if he did so, the amendments had to be accompanied by a report from the board. Thus any disagreement would be brought into the open. What actually happened was rather different, as is shown by the cabinet papers and UAB files now open to inspection in the Public Record Office.

Before the UAB had even been appointed, its officials produced a suggested scale of needs (including rent)—16s and 14s for male and female householders and 24s for a married couple, with additions ranging from 2s for a child under three to 6s for one aged 14-18. Unemployment insurance benefits were 17s and 15s for a single man or woman, 26s for a married man; 2s each child. Average earnings for men were about £3 a week.

The board's officials argued that the unemployment insurance scheme "could hardly survive if the general level of the allowances granted by the board were in excess of the payments for which the recipient had been required to make weekly contributions"—an argument that seems unduly pessimistic in the light of the postwar history of national insurance benefits, which for most claimants have been consistently below national assistance and supplementary benefit levels. But the officials were not only concerned about the credibility of the insurance scheme. They were equally anxious to avoid the situation (nowadays accepted as normal) in which a major function of the assistance scheme is to supplement insurance benefits. Unemployment assistance was intended for those whose benefit rights had run out, not as a way of topping up benefits.

Estimates of subsistence needs played a surprisingly minor role in fixing the adult scale rates. The board's officials wrote: "There is no absolute criterion or scientific basis of need. The comforts of one age become the necessities of the next, and any 'minimum standard' must be determined largely by time and place." The scientific approach, however, had influential advocates, including Eleanor Rathbone's Children's Minimum Campaign Committee, and their view was strengthened by the recently published dietary recommendations of the BMA Committee on Nutrition. The recommended adult diet would have cost about 6s a week.

Starting from this point, one of the board's senior officials, George Reid (later secretary of the board and a member of the Beveridge committee),

worked out a minimum income scale for families of different sizes. For necessities other than food he used the actual expenditure of low income households. Rent was assumed to account for a quarter of the family's expenditure. Reid also produced a scale based on the more expensive diet assumed in Hubert Llewellyn Smith's *New Survey of London Life and Labour*. The table below compares the two scales with the unemployment benefit rates.

The striking fact about these figures is that the best estimates of adult subsistence needs then available were shown to be far below the benefit rates. There could be no question of the board's allowances for adults being set as low as this.

The addition to unemployment benefit of 2s per child, on the other hand, was plainly inadequate. The board adopted more generous rates varying with the age of the child. But this gave rise to another problem—the relationship between wages and assistance payments. The campaign for family allowances was ten years and a world war from achieving its aim. So long as the working man had to keep his family on a wage that took no account of family size, there were bound to be cases in which the needs of a large family were assessed at a higher figure than their normal income.

To meet this situation, the board introduced the "wage stop" rule, which prohibited the payment of allowances at or above the level of the applicant's normal work income. It survived until 1975, when it was repealed by the Child Benefit Act. But while the wage stop could be relied on to prevent an individual applicant from being as well or better off out of work, it would have made nonsense of the scale rates themselves if it had operated in very large numbers of cases. Various ways of preventing this were considered. The method finally proposed, known as the "supercut," was to deduct 1s from the rates for the fifth and each subsequent member of a family. In addition, some minor changes were made to the scale itself.

The board was also concerned about the danger of paying single men and women enough to live on without working. The rates adopted varied from 15s for an adult man to 12s for a girl under 18. Even the 15s rate was not enough to pay a normal board and lodging charge, but Reid argued that landlords were prepared to accept a lower fee from an unemployed lodger who "would forgo special attentions in the way of food and services which he received when paying a full fee." Cases where the basic rates were insufficient could be dealt with by the use of discretion, but the board were agreed that, for the normal run of cases, the single persons' rates should be kept low "having regard to the questions of social policy involved in this class."

Subsistence estimates and benefit rates, 1934

	minimum income (BMA diet)	minimum income (London survey diet)	unemployment benefit
single man	12s 8½d	13s 4½d	17s
man and wife	19s 11d	21s 8d	26s
man, wife, child of 2	24s 10½d	25s 3d	28s
man, wife, children of 2, 8, 14	35s 8d	34s 4d	32s