

EDUCATION

Briefing May 2024

BRIEFING SCOPE

This short briefing aims to outline four key education issues facing black communities in Britain. This is not an exhaustive list of the main issues, but they do represent areas significant of importance impacting the educational outcomes of black children and young people. It is beyond the scope of this briefing to delve into each of these sub-topic areas in detail, therefore they are limited in their analysis. However, this briefing seeks to provide a short overview of the core issues in:


01. Black educational achievement
02. School exclusions
03. The teacher workforce
04. Higher education outcomes

There are certainly many other issues which could be discussed in other briefings such as the increase in police in schools (highlighted in the Justice briefing), the lack of investment in mental health and adultification. These issues are referred to in other briefings. However, future briefings will also explore these issues individually in more detail.

THE CONTEXT OF BLACK EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT

It is critically important to contextualise black educational achievement by recognising the diverse histories and experiences of black people in Britain. Too often the nuance and diversity of black communities is overlooked and then harmfully homogenised. This leads to flawed comparisons with categories such as 'black African' (which consists of people from a continent of 54 countries, over 3000 languages and 1.2 billion people), with small islands of the Caribbean.





The homogenised approach overlooks when different black communities arrived in the UK, how they arrived, what they arrived with and the political state of Britain at the time of their arrival. All these issues matter and provide some explanatory factors to achievement and underachievement. For example, while the period of educationally subnormal schools in the 1960s and 70s impacted groups from various communities, black Caribbean children were disproportionately represented in these, even in cases when they overperformed in school¹. There is a legacy of institutional neglect and harm through education that was more acute in the past but still has a generational and cumulative effect today.


Some African migrants arrived in the UK fleeing war and conflict. Others have a family history in Britain dating back to the period of the colonial development and welfare act 1946, which encouraged African students to obtain scholarships and study in the UK. It is clearly beyond the scope of this briefing to do a full historical analysis of the diversity of black historical experiences and the impacts on achievement. However, it is important to highlight that these differences matter, but are neglected and oversimplified in statistical measures of achievement. This leads to a 'model minority' narrative that essentialises and oversimplifies black educational achievement.

01. BLACK EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT TODAY

While the current measures of black educational achievement are flawed and require reform, these are the only measures we have at present. However, again it is important to see the statistics below considering the above context and critiques of how black people are categorised statistically. In terms of progress 8 scores, the broad category of black African pupils is currently (0.35), which is higher than white British groups (-0.18) and black Caribbean groups (-0.33).² The same trend is true of GCSE Mathematics and English achievement, where just over half of black African pupils achieve a grade 5 or above. This is compared to 47.7% for white British groups and 34.6% for black Caribbean groups.³

There have been various assumptions made about the divergence in these statistics between black African and black Caribbean groups. Some argue that it is due to differences in family structure and rates of lone parenting. However more recent data from the Census has highlighted that the difference in lone parent's rates is not as pronounced as previously indicated.⁴ Further lone parent rates in black African communities are significantly higher than in white communities, yet black African groups still achieve higher educationally than white groups.

Others make a distinction between 'voluntary minorities' (such as immigrant groups who may be more recent arrivals to the country and have very high educational aspirations) and 'involuntary' minorities (such as African Americans or black Caribbean groups) who may hold less optimistic views around social mobility and the transformative possibilities



of education.⁵ Historical educational neglect and racism with black Caribbean communities through practices such as the subnormal schools could have damaged the optimism and hope in education among some black families too.

Some argue that this theory of 'immigrant optimism' accounts for the contrast between black Caribbean and Mixed white and black Caribbean pupils on the one hand and black African and Mixed white and black African pupils on the other, whose achievement is substantially higher despite the same or higher levels of risk in terms of low SES, neighbourhood deprivation, and poverty.⁶ However, while varying explanatory factors have been made, it is important to note again that these are explanations of flawed measures and comparators.


For example, research of black African educational achievement in Lambeth, showed the wide diversity within black African communities with factors impacting the divergences of achievement between African language groups.⁷ Various possible explanations were considered for the differences in performance between different black African language groups including factors such as stages of English proficiency, disadvantage, and pupil mobility.

Black achievement is also oftentimes compared to Indian achievement, which is again an oversimplified comparison. For example, black Caribbean migrants for example arrived in the 1960's and moved into poor urban, inner-city areas populated by the white British working class. In contrast, other long standing ethnic minority groups have different patterns of migration. Indian migrants were more likely to be of high socioeconomic status in their host countries, many were professionals and managers, and migrated to a more varied and diverse selection of geographical areas.⁸ These class differences at the point of migration provide different levels of social, human and economic capital which have a cumulative effect on outcomes and achievement.

02. SCHOOL EXCLUSIONS

The exclusions of black children in official statistics only reaches the 'tip of the iceberg'. Exclusions happen in multiple ways through factors such as off-rolling, which is the practice of removing a pupil from the school roll without a formal, permanent exclusion or by encouraging a parent to remove their child from the school roll, when the removal is primarily in the interests of the school rather than in the best interests of the pupil.

Off-rolling statistics are not captured through statistical measures, however there is ample evidence that it disproportionately impacts black pupils. Research has shown that black pupils are more likely to experience an "unexplained" exit from school. This study showed that 1 in 8 (12.5%) of black pupils had experienced an unexplained exit from school, compared to 8.7% of white children.⁹



In the statistics that are recorded we see wide disparities with black communities (particularly black Caribbean groups), having among the highest rates of exclusion both in terms of permanent exclusions and suspensions. However, the rates of temporary exclusions for black pupils decreased from 8.98 in 2007 to 6.42 in 2022.¹⁰ There is a similar trend with permanent exclusions with a decline from 23 to 7 exclusions for every 10,000 pupils between 2007 and 2022.

Finally, pupils from black Caribbean and Mixed White and black Caribbean backgrounds are twice as likely to be identified with Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs as pupils from white British backgrounds. Some¹¹ children from black Caribbean backgrounds may be unwarrantedly identified as having SEMH needs, which may result in an inappropriate or narrowed curriculum particularly in secondary school. This provides worryingly close similarities to the period of where black children were disproportionately placed in 'subnormal schools' and wrongly excluded from mainstream education.

03. THE TEACHER WORKFORCE

The teacher workforce is not diverse enough; however, this is not due to lack of interest in teaching but due to issues with initial teacher training institutes disproportionately rejecting black applicants. Research shows that while there has been an increase in black people applying for Initial Teacher Training (ITT) in the past decade, retention and promotion gaps widened.¹² As previous research has shown,


As stated by Tereshchenko, Mills and Bradbury:¹³

“Both overt and covert racism takes a toll on BAME teachers' wellbeing, progression and job satisfaction. BAME teachers had the same high levels of workload as all teachers, plus an additional 'hidden workload' of coping with racism.

Evidence from the USA also suggests that having a same-race teacher is associated with improved outcomes for pupils of colour.¹⁴ Positive associations have been found for social-emotional, attitudinal, and behavioural outcomes, including higher attendance and fewer exclusions. Therefore, reducing the gap between interest, application, and entry into teaching for Black professionals needs to close significantly.

04. HIGHER EDUCATION OUTCOMES

In 2022 just over 43,000 people from black ethnic groups in England were accepted to full-time undergraduate courses in the UK. 34,500 were black African, 6,700 were black Caribbean and 2,100 were from other black backgrounds. A further 9,000 people from mixed black and white backgrounds were accepted. The 2022 total was a new record high in terms of university entry rates for black people.¹⁵ Proportionally, 51% of black young people entered university, compared to 32% of white groups. More than two thirds



of black African young people went to higher education, which is well above the national average across all ethnic groups (47%). The rate in the black Caribbean group was lower at 46% and slightly below the national average.

However, despite these rates of entry (which are particularly high with black African groups), only 9% enter high tariff institutions which is the lowest rate of any ethnic group.¹⁶ While black students are overrepresented in terms of attendance of Higher Education institutions, there are problematic ethnic disparities in outcomes. According to the OfS, black graduates were less likely to gain a first or upper second-class degree than graduates from other ethnic groups (when analysed by broad ethnic categories). In 2021 to 2022, 63.1% of full-time black undergraduates did so in 2021 to 2022, which was nearly 10 percentage points less than for the broad category ethnic group with the next lowest rate.¹⁷

This poses the question of the extent to which black students get value for money in terms of their financial investments into higher education. While attending university is associated with higher earnings when measured across all ethnic groups, further analysis needs to be conducted on the economic impact of higher education for black communities, to identify opportunities for improvement.

CONCLUSION

The education landscape for black communities in Britain is complex however it is too often oversimplified, homogenised and politicised. The lack of depth of historical and contextual analysis leads to stereotypical tropes and the misinterpretation of data. There are areas of positive changes and improvements, that sit alongside stagnation and continued decline. However, what is clear is that educational disparities sit alongside economic and social disadvantage, which hinder achievement, outcomes and the potential of black children and young people.

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