



Secondary School Admissions: The Choice for Black Parents In the London Borough of Hackney, United Kingdom

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Abstract

In the UK, the law places a lot of emphasis on parental rights and choice – the right to choose the school that suits the needs of your child. Parents can list in order of preference and this ranked order is lodged with the education authority (through one common application form), and hope that within the complexities of the admissions process, the system mitigates in their favour. For some black parents, the oversubscription criterion is often perceived as the hurdle within the allocation procedure. Their children will loose out. This paper provides an insight into the views of some black parents in the London Borough of Hackney and through a personal and critical engagement; analysis is brought to bear on a terrain of current educational debate. An attempt is made here to address the role of education in a capitalist society.

Keywords: School admissions, African Caribbean, Hackney, Educational underachievement, Black children, Black parents, Transition

1. Introduction

Wearied by the lack of mobility for the urban poor, including the majority of minority ethnic residents in London, and the evidence of social exclusion of African Caribbean children (Wright et al 2005), the black community has begun a search to provide an alternative conceptual framework to redress the educational isolation of their children. In an engaging and highly explosive national debate on secondary education and school admissions, Hackney's lack of a clear vision for secondary school provision has embodies a new level of political engagement for the wider community. At stake is the flagship policy of New Labour to further erode the role of Local Education Authorities and give to schools greater control over their admissions policy. Without downplaying the importance of communities in having a say in their local schools, New Labour has re-introduced 'parents power' in the form of parent councils in the newly constituted 'Trust-Status Schools', though it is not clear whether their role would be consultative rather than decision-making (Hatcher 2005). The White Paper 2005 sets out to encourage all schools to become 'Trust Schools' with greater independence and freedom to run their own affairs – including statutory powers to appoint the majority of the governing body, control their assets, and set admission policies.

1.1 *The Skills Agenda and school selection practices*

The logic of capitalism is the commodification of all essential services that affect our daily lives. Within the realm of the state education system the liberalisation of trade in services seems to many to have heralded a new era of 'business takeover of schools'. Rikowski and Rikowski (2006) contended that the Education White Paper 2005 is the manifestation of the General Agreement of Trade in Services (GATS), along with its elements of commercialisation, privatisation and profit-making, which gives the green light to multinational companies to gradually make inroads into the state education system – the state funded services, schools and libraries. This new approach and the injection of private investment are seen as the solution to the crisis in education within the inner city areas. The authors further explained how the government's political agenda has been the development of a 'skills agenda, namely lifelong learning, to focus and accelerate the capabilities of individuals to become efficient workers' (Rikowski and Rikowski 2006: 25).

Current policies in British schools do not address satisfactorily the problem 'school selection practices' that openly discriminate against some groups of parents and pupils. It is most parents' wish to enrol their child in an education institution where students as a rule do well academically. However a number of other factors influence black parents' choice of a secondary school for their child. One overriding factor has been whether secondary schools actively discriminate against black children in their admissions criteria. The two major concerns of this paper are: What does

'choice' mean for black parents and (b) How systematic are black parents in their choice of secondary schools for their children.

Although in most areas, transfer from primary to secondary schools is automatic, (with the exception being where the 11plus exam exists), it is widely accepted that some schools are increasingly placing a significant emphasis on the potential academic performance of their secondary intake. Within the paradigm of formal and informal evaluation, school effectiveness characteristics are embedded in parents' minds in the form of academic grounding in particular knowledge, linguistic and social behaviour, styles, personal dispositions and modes of thought and expression, and – the crowning virtue - good examination results. Students are judged 'qualified and able' or 'academic failures' according to how completely and convincingly these characteristics are displayed. 'Cultural Capital not only produces distinctions among individuals, it also produces its own value' (Olneck 2000: 321). In the UK, an assumption is made on the likelihood of the candidate achieving five higher grade/ passes at GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education), which is then seen as the performance indicator of the school's education provision. The DfEE document, 'Excellence in Schools' (1997) stressed the fact that educational attainment demands in schools were now becoming a key factor in the isolation, non-participation and social exclusion of young people within our society – thus exacerbating social inequality.

As secondary schools are essentially the avenues through which individuals move through the education system – from childhood to adolescence, the establishment's point of view is that a balanced national curriculum is provided which enables the individual to acquire knowledge and conceptual understanding through a range of subject areas. Success at the knowledge prescribed virtually guarantees the recipient enhanced occupation status – tied to education through the notion of meritocracy. This view sees competitiveness through value added measurements as the levelling out of opportunities by which skills and abilities of individuals are assessed. Are black parents aware of the competitiveness of the education system and is there a realisation of these political and economic goals that permeate the state education system? In this article I will argue that the black community in London is aware of the value of educational qualifications and that, most black parents are aware that secondary school selection is a vital process in the ladder of opportunity, and in consolidating the aspirations and aptitudes of their offspring.

2. Methodology

For the purpose of this study, 'black' represents people of African and African Caribbean background. A group of 25 black parents from the London Borough of Hackney, were canvassed for their views on secondary school selection. No claim would be made here that this group is representative of Hackney's black community, but their views raise a number of concerns about the local education provision.

3. Background to the article

Hackney is considered a deprived and socially disadvantaged area. All the government benchmarks attest to this fact. The recent report by OFSTED spelt out the problem:

"The London Borough of Hackney is one of the most deprived parts of London. Many residents experience economic disadvantage and crime rates are high. It is also a borough with great diversity amongst its population: about 80% of school pupils are from minority ethnic groups. The largest ethnic group in Hackney schools are those of African and Caribbean heritage." OFSTED (2003) pp. 7.

The extraordinary proportion of over 80% ethnic minority pupils in Hackney schools invite the question; 'Where do the indigenous population educate their children?' The report admits that a high proportion of children attend schools outside the borough, but omits to state their ethnic origin. Key to all this has been the issue of educational standards, and has led to the borough's education service being taken over by an independent body, a private public partnership, The Learning Trust (2002). Unfortunately, The Learning Trust has not been an unalloyed success. Attempts to boost academic achievement still seem a distant dream and Hackney continues to be placed in the lowest category in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (2005).

No evidence exists to confirm that the white middle-classes are abandoning Hackney schools to avoid their children attending the same schools as black and ethnic minority children, but the stereotyping of the black child in the education literature as un-teachable, underachieving, uncooperative – (ungrateful even)... is well documented (Gillborn and Mirza 2000; Mirza and Reay 2000; Blair 2001; Gillborn 2002). Moreover, critics have recently pointed out that of the 2,200 pupils of primary school leaving age in Hackney, secondary places are only available for 1,500 pupils (Saum 2004). Some secondary school places are increasingly at a premium as the crisis in primary-secondary transfer grows. However, there is also a general assumption among the middle classes that schools outside the borough provide the best chance for a good education. Also in an increasing competitive environment, the middle classes are more able to 'manipulate' the admissions system, master the appeals process and to identify the schools where multiple applications can be sent. The same schools are in a position to 'cream' the pupils who would maximize their examination results. In

a recent study on secondary schools admissions, West and Hind (2003) concluded that some schools adopt unfair admissions criteria to exclude some groups and include others.

“A significant minority of schools, notable those that are their own admission authorities – voluntary-aided and foundation schools – a variety of criteria are used which appear to be designed to select certain groups of pupils and so exclude others. These include children of employees; children of former pupils; partial selection by ability/ aptitude in a subject area or by general ability; and children with a family connection to the school”. (West and Hind 2003, pp. 3)

The Code of Practice on school admissions clearly suggests that some of these practices may contravene the Race Relations Act 1976, and the fact that some schools continue to ignore this advice is noteworthy. What is even more astonishing is that in a follow-up study by the said researchers on the admission criteria of secondary schools in London, not once did they raise the issue of black children in London schools (West, Hind & Pennell 2003). Writing in general terms, the researchers identified a number of other ‘idiosyncratic’ criteria and practices that were ‘potentially unfair’, such as interviews, imprecise and unclear criteria, reference to pupil’s academic record, or the record of siblings. One conclusion that could be drawn here is that some secondary schools in London, (particularly foundation and voluntary-aided schools), actively discriminate against some groups – on the basis of race and ethnicity – and in so doing create enclaves of educational desirability and underachievement ghettos. If black children are to meet their academic potential, then they need schools with good records to prepare them for university. However the serial wastage of black boys and young black men in particular, attest to the fact that they continue to lose out and that in the largely unregulated market, and may not be engaging in further endeavours (as adults) to further their own education. Some groups continue to benefit at the expense of others.

3.1 Can Black parents exercise ‘Choice’ on a similar basis as other parents?

The question of choice is a highly contentious issue in the literature. The New Labour government sees ‘choice’ as a mechanism to drive up standards in the state educational institutions; the benefits derived would be for all sectors of society. However, Gewirtz et al (1995) pointed out that choice in education varies across social class and ethnicity, and is inequitable. The issue of social class permeates the mechanisms of the system and restricts the range of options for some groups. As they pointed out:

“First, choice is very directly and powerfully related to social class differences. Second, choice emerges as a major new factor in maintaining and indeed reinforcing social-class divisions and inequalities” Gewirtz et al (1995), pg. 55.

For some theorists, the problem is amplified through the outmoded and outdated structures that prop up the education system, which do not have a tendency to enhance equality. It is the system itself that needs an overhaul.

“While society moves into a post-industrial, post-modern age, our schools and teachers continue to cling to crumbling edifices of bureaucracy and modernity: to rigid hierarchies, isolated classrooms, segregated department and outdated career structures.....” (Hargreaves 1994, p. x)

Should parents be asked to place the development and education of their children on hold while awaiting the long revolution in provision? Choice in education appeals to a growing sector of middleclass Londoners, and this ‘flight’ further erodes attempts to achieve prosperity and well being for all children in our schools. In this explanation, ‘choice’ is a clever ploy designed to appeal to the middle classes – particularly those who believe that self interest is the only motivator.

One parent, himself a teacher, said the following:

Conrad: “We have lived in Hackney for the greater part of our lives. My three children were all born here. We wanted to stay loyal to The Borough of Hackney, despite the issue of quality of secondary school education. Of the four secondary schools we selected for our son, our first three choices were in Hackney and the fourth – in Tower Hamlets. We got none of the schools we chose. Instead we were offered two all-boys schools in Tower Hamlets, which – we are told, are almost 90% Bangladeshi. We wanted to stay loyal to Hackney, but Hackney is not loyal to us”.

By far the most incisive comment came from Gladys, a mother of three with a history of fighting the Borough of Hackney for appropriate schools for her children.

Gladys: “Black parents in Hackney do not have choice. They have preference. They are given a chance to select their preference of secondary schools by the Learning Trust, then they cross their fingers and hope that their preference is translated in the choice of school for their child”

3.2 Black children and educational achievement

Black children have not had a similar measure of success within the British education system as other indigenous groups have had, even though surveys have shown that black families tend to be more positive about the values and need for education than their white counterparts (DfEE 2001, Parekh 2000). Indeed, recent statistics show that black boys were more likely to be excluded (83% of the permanent exclusions in 1995-6); six times higher than their white

counterparts. Poor academic outcomes of black children, particularly black boys have been well documented (DfES 2006; DfES 2004); Majors (2001), and it is suggested that the differences in attainment levels, (particularly in GCSEs between black children and their white counterparts), may represent a long process of decline in relative attainment of black pupils in the compulsory education system. The most recent published national statistics clearly stated that:

“All minority groups within the Black category, and pupils of Mixed White and Black Caribbean heritage are consistently below the national average across all Key Stages, at GCSE and equivalent and Post -16.

For example, at GCSE and equivalent, 41.7% of Black Caribbean pupils, 44.1% of pupils of Mixed White and Black Caribbean heritage, 48.3% of black African pupils and 41.7% of other Black pupils achieve 5+A*-C compared to 54.9% nationally”. (DfES 2006, 2)

In a recent review of educational attainment in Hackney, underachievement was particularly noted among black children.

“Evidence shows a clear dip in performance among Afro-Caribbean boys between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3” (The Learning Trust 2003, p. 4). This is further reinforced by the government’s own analysis that ... “despite general improvement..... there is evidence that the attainment gap for this group is widening...” (DfES 2006, p.2).

Supported by statistics from sources such as the Ethnic Minority Monitoring Programme, African Caribbean children seem to perform as well as other groups at the Baseline Assessment Tasks. By Key Stage One, they are falling behind other groups. This trend continues to Key Stage Two, but the dramatic drop in performance of African Caribbean Children (especially African Caribbean boys) seems to be between Key Stage Two and Key Stage Three. Here we see significant attitudinal changes and pressures that shape the relationship between teachers and African Caribbean boys – many at this stage are bordering on inevitable exclusion or alternative learning strategies. In 2001/2002, The London Borough of Hackney recorded only 8% of African Caribbean boys achieving the standard of 5+ A-C passes in the national attainment tests – GCSE exams.

Many mistaken assumptions have been made regarding the awareness of educational expectations held by black parents of the academic abilities of their children. Gillborn (2002) pointed out that teachers’ assumptions about ‘ability’ based on ‘standardised’ tests, have been for most the corner-stone of their predictive power of pupils’ eventual performance at national attainment tests (i.e. GCSE exams).

“Teachers make judgements about ability in a wide range of different contexts and using a variety of criteria, including test scores, judgements of written work, oral presentations and in relation to students’ behaviour. These judgements and the labels they produce are of differing degrees of importance” (Gillborn 2002, p. 4).

(Gillborn and Mirza 2000) have suggested that the term ‘underachievement’ has become loaded in stereotype and has somehow slipped into the pervasive ‘discourse of despair’ among and about some ethnic minority groups. They contended that some groups, say African Caribbeans may be ranked low in the national measure of achievement, yet the said group may well be achieving highly in some schools and some LEAs. Replying to the question, “Why do some schools do better than others?” Blair (2001) stated that:

“Black students need to know that they are not only welcome and wanted in the school, but that they are treated fairly, their cultures will be respected, the political issues that beset them as black people will be understood, and form part of the schools’ sensitive responsibilities towards them. They need to know that their particular needs will be recognised as complex and comprising their ethnic and ‘racial’ identities as well as their needs as ‘children’ or young people, but also that their differences will be appreciated.” (Blair 2001, p. 42).

3.3 Transition to Secondary Schools

The careful selection of a pupil’s secondary school has increasingly been promoted as vital to the academic sustainability of individuals as the link between educational attainment and occupational attainment in industrial countries is made. The educational reforms of the New Right in the UK were instrumental in expanding social inequality, imposed around the economic imperatives of a polarised workforce. Through the state agencies ‘to promote competition’ (OFSTED), the successful schools which guarantee higher yields in scholastic outcomes are seen as the engines producing status advantage, leading to a workforce increasingly polarised between the highly paid skilled elite and the low paid, unskilled.

One of the respondents, a black parent in Hackney revealed:

Jonathan: “We selected four secondary schools from the given list, and graded them on a scale of 1 to 4, the choices we thought would be good educational institutions for our son. Though we would have been overjoyed if our ‘First Choice’ had been given to our son, we would have accepted any of our four choices. In the end, we were given none. All the schools we placed on our list were Hackney schools and we now feel very let down by the Hackney Learning Trust. We do intend to appeal the decision, but we are not confident that it would get us anywhere.”

Another black parent - also disappointed by the unavailability of good secondary schools in Hackney commented:

Angelia: "My child has not been allocated a school, despite our selection of four. One third of the Year 6 group in our (Hackney) school (transferring to secondary schools) have not been allocated a place. This is very bad indeed. And as it happens, most of them happen to be boys. I was sent a list of schools that have available secondary school places. Two are in the neighbouring borough of Tower Hamlets (both all-boys schools); two are in The Borough of Haringey, two are in the borough of Islington and one in the Borough of Waltham Forest. We went on the internet to read the OFSTED report of the seven schools on the list and they were all low achieving schools. We will be going through the appeals process".

Primary and secondary schools are characteristically of different cultures, associated with the pupil's age and stage of development. It is usually the case that one secondary school has several primary schools as 'feeders'. As argued by Hargreaves (1980), the transition process represents the notion of a particular phase of development between childhood and adolescence highlighting the supposedly existing homogeneity in physical, moral, emotional and intellectual growth. Within this paradigm, whole cohorts of pupils are transferred to another school, many to face new teachers and new pupils in a totally new environment. At the end of key stage 2 (national SAT tests) primary schools (5-11 age group) deliver their pupils up to the secondary schools (11-18 age group), where the compulsory education requirement ends. Most will encounter for the first time specialist subject teachers with widely differing practice and subjective perceptions that have significant implications for some ethnic minority groups. Pupils are then transferred to Sixth Form colleges, colleges of Further Education or are deemed ready for transition to university education. The transition from primary to secondary schools is seen as a critical period in the education system. Pupils are seen as agents moving through changing social contexts of the social structures which entails targets, quotas and ethnic monitoring.

For many the designated secondary school is greatly influenced by the Local Education Authority's (LEAs) provision, the size of the catchment area and the projected population growth (Galton et al 2000), sometimes based on the assumption that able children in the top half of the ability range of primary schools need specialist schools that recognise their aptitude and abilities. Though setting and streaming are widespread throughout secondary education, the cognitive and affective learning outcomes were sometimes at odds with that of children's assessment of the characteristics of their classroom environment. From a secondary schools' point of view, the most frequently used admissions criteria are: siblings, distance, medical/social need, catchment area, 'first preference', pupils with special educational needs and feeder schools.

While there is a recognition that some pupils are adversely affected by the change from primary school to secondary, many studies that propose to throw light on the issue seem to offer limited advice on how best to address the problems. Galton & Willcocks (1983) reported a marked decline in achievement, motivation and enjoyment and attributed this to the discrepancy between the child centeredness of primary school and the subject centeredness of secondary school. This key explanatory factor, they suggested, accounted for the slow-down rate of task engagement of some pupils in their new secondary school environment.

In Delamont & Galton (1996) ORACLE study (Observation Research and Classroom Learning Evaluation), teachers and pupils were observed and pupils were tested in the final term before leaving primary school, and at the end of the first school year of secondary school. They reported that in regards to curriculum delivery, curriculum content and teaching method, very little attempt was made to maintain continuity between the two phases of school experience. Earlier studies, e.g. Dutch and McCall (1974) had concluded that the children most at risk from the transition process were the less confident pupils, those from poor economic and social backgrounds and the younger and less mature pupils. They seemed to experience problems with the physical and academic organisation of the new school, as well as the standards of work. Other recognisable problems were also the breakdown in pupil/ teacher relationships particularly with pupils of a non-academic disposition. Most endured a climate of low expectation.

There is evidence that some of the lessons of the past have been learnt. Further analysis from Rudduck, Chaplain and Wallace (1996) suggests that transition to secondary school is not quite as painful as it used to be. They however pointed out that for most pupils, full engagement with the learning process (i.e. good study habits, good attendance and homework) did not take on significance until year 10, when the realisation that this was an opportunity to gain meaningful qualifications for employment, was grounded. However, for many the gaps in knowledge were too large to bridge to enable them to catch up fully.

It is important to note that each school responds to the needs of pupils at an individual level, - termed 'functional individuality' - implementing school improvement strategies to suit their own cohort groups. It is the pupils as individuals who decide on the degree of their commitment, although it is the teachers' skilled intervention that reinforces that commitment to the academic aspirations of the school. Most people in an inner-city area know someone who lived in the city when their children attended primary school, but fled to suburban areas to avoid urban state secondary schools. Research into underachievement has highlighted boys' restlessness when confined for long periods in one space. As pointed out by Gordon & Lahelma (1996), cited in Pointon (2000)

“Boys in secondary schoolstry to, so it seems, decrease their immobility and increase their limited space by rocking their chairs, tapping their pencils, shifting and tapping the floor..... Girls, however, tend to sit more quietly” (Pointon 2000, p. 378).

Is this the general picture in most schools and what about the perceived notion that many teachers do not seem to be engaging the pupils?

4. Should we blame the schools or parents?

Why are inner city secondary schools so repellent to parents? Is the performance of a secondary school the sole consequence of what is taught, how it is taught and who teaches it? The conventional view is that inner city schools have their share of problems and, as a result, have a predominance of ‘bad schools’ while suburban schools provide children with a ‘better’ education, (i.e. schools with shared vision, strong leadership, well organised structure and visionary well trained staff). They are effective because they have high expectations for their pupils. The opposing view put forward by progressive educators is that inner city schools – when they are not effective – are so because of the appalling poverty that prevails in the neighbourhoods, the under-funded state of affairs which exacerbates social inequality (Davies 2000), and the emphasis on low skills (vocationalism of the curriculum) which polarises the workforce. There is a general feeling among some black parents that, if inner city schools were funded as generously as their Middle England /suburban neighbours, the attainment gap would disappear.

If we subscribe to the ‘bad school’ theory of school improvement, we are rejecting the dominant paradigm of ‘technical rationality’ that though inner city teachers are trained in the same way, and should have the same subject knowledge as their suburban counterparts, teachers in inner city schools nevertheless perform badly, unable to meet the current urban complexities facing teachers and learners. By coincidence, suburban schools, it may be argued, just happen to have the best teachers with higher level of professional expertise than their less affluent counterparts. Issues such as poor resources and working environment, pay stagnation, increased workload, and declining status and morale are alien to this workforce. It is the collaborative professional action that brings about the successful school environment, as measured by national exam and SATs performance.

Observers will testify however, that when inner city schools can restrict their intake, (eliminating the most distasteful aspects of social behaviour), to children from more affluent backgrounds, they perform just as well as their suburban counterparts. It is a known fact that most parents - black and white alike - do not warm to the idea of sending their children to secondary schools which, in their eyes, are underachieving. Can we therefore assume that the school location is the only locus for school performance? To some observers, it is a combination of a bright, affluent intake and adequate resources that is the real foundation of a school’s success (Davies 2000). Christopher Jencks cited in Lewyn (2000, p.5), stated that qualitative differences between high schools seem to explain about two percent of the variation in the students’ educational achievement (and that) equalizing the quality of elementary schools would reduce [test score] inequality by 3 percent or less.

Commenting on similar concerns in the USA, Lewyn then concluded;

“It appears that there is little educational difference between ‘good’ suburban schools and ‘bad’ urban schools: rather the difference is in the schools’ student bodies. In other words, if the Buffalo and Clarence school districts retain their current school boards, teachers and administrators, but switched students, parents would be fleeing Clarence for Buffalo, and would be complaining about the alleged idiocy of the Clarence school board” (Lewyn 2000, p.5).

In another view, the problem of the education system lies with irresponsible parents who are too lazy to take seriously their responsibility of their child’s education and as such, ‘free ride’ on the responsibility of others (Tooley 1999). This view criticises not only the ‘irresponsible parents’ who place no effort into their child’s education, but also the parents who are ‘disconnected’ when it comes to choosing the education institutions for their children. It sees the characteristic of ‘choice’ as essential if ‘sink schools’ – failing schools are to be rooted out of the system. The fact that these institutions are allowed to ‘limp along perpetuating disadvantage for those who have to patronise them’, is simply the result of poor judgement of the consumers (parents).

“If I do not want to be bothered to choose, then as long as there are a significant number who are discriminating choosers, suppliers and producers cannot take the risk that I am not one of them.... In exactly the same way, ‘educationally irresponsible’ parents would be able to ‘free ride’ on the responsibility of others. Provided that there are some educationally concerned parents using the education service, all will be able to benefit from their responsibility” Tooley (1999), p. 8.

The problem with this model is that it sees ‘choice’ as inevitable within the diversity of provision, and assumes parents would choose within an ethically prescribed framework. It ignores the fact that parents usually exercise their prejudices – within choice – on the basis of social class, race and ethnicity, religion and a host of other factors. What parents want is not ‘choice’, but a greater realisation that their nearest comprehensive would be of sufficiently good quality to deliver the services that are needed.

4.1 Education and Capitalism

One explanation of the problem is to see the system as a product of inevitable inequality in the capitalist system – and the failure of its educational policies to expand its ‘circle of opportunity’. We do not believe that it is coincidental that a small group of individuals have access to the ‘better’ educational institutions and that the majority have to ‘put up’ with their lot. Marxist theorists agree that the main purpose of education in capitalist societies is to produce the kinds and types of labour that are needed for effective competition with other capitalists. (Saltman & Gabbard 2003) see the function of schools in capitalist societies as moulding children to fit the goals of the government, and as such, the market. It is therefore an education system geared towards selecting people for the job market. But the way this process is set in place has the distinct effect of polarisation within the education system. The presence of an ever increasing private fee-paying sector in the U.K. education system has the effect of dividing pupils into two main groups. One group benefits from the increasing hierarchies of education provision, resulting in social class inequalities, and the other has to contend with an education system which teaches compliance and subordination to the state agents and an acceptance of their role, embedded in their social relationship within the economy.

For those with money and influence, under-funded schools are not an option. Their children are selected for those parts of the education system where privatisation redirects public funds for private accumulation. This is effectively done by setting aside educational institutions for the sons and daughters of the capitalist ruling class and their chief servants and agents. Teachers and trainers have huge strategic importance in capitalist society. They are saddled with responsibility for generating ‘work ready graduates’ for the ruling class. Sparks (1994) puts it like this:

“Much of what is involved in that process is precisely learning obedience and deference to authority figures. But a part of education is concerned with transmission of the social and technical skills needed to administer capitalist society. Part of what is taught to working class children is, potentially at least, valuable material that can be used to change the world. Above all, what actually goes on in education is not the direct result of what the ruling class want. They, or at least their servants and agents, try to achieve that end, but they are challenged, more or less successfully, from below, by teachers, parents and by young people themselves” (Sparks 1994, p14).

However, even within the state education system, little replicas of the private education system exist, i.e. selective state schools and highly sought after - specialist schools - generally reserved for the middle classes. This leads to huge pressures from parents to ascertain for themselves the ‘juicy bits’ on offer, and the system to fit people into a niche within the class structure. The vicious hierarchical system is designed to preserve the rights of the ruling class; (providing a few entrants to the upper reaches of the class system); a middle tier for the sons and daughters of the middle classes, (providing the technical specialists needed lower down the order), and a state system for the rest of the population (providing a regulated process of state testing, league tables and a National Curriculum, instructing teachers what they should teach). Competition for funding in these schools is also crucial to the capitalists’ ideology.

“Under-funded schools struggling to provide mandated requirements can only provide an emaciated education which in turn funnels any graduates into meaningless work or jail. The minimum standards for an education are those that would only qualify a person for a low paying job. Schools in trouble are punished, while those that succeed are rewarded” Daims (2004; p. 121)

But capitalism is a dynamic system which is constantly demanding new inputs of labour, new inputs of energy and new inputs of talents and ideas. It requires therefore some degree of flexibility within the system to produce all the new ideas and technological inputs that are needed to ensure the capitalist system stays competitive. Therefore, what capitalists want out of education is deeply contradictory. It would like an education system that maintains the status quo, but at the same time, they would like the education system to adapt to their demands, and change to their economic needs (Sparks 1994). The replicas (of the private education system) within the state education system, goes some way towards achieving this, and for this reason, selection is necessary. All these factors apply even more strongly in the case of national school exams and the relentless vilification of teachers. The rising rates of school exams passes in the U.K. tell only part of the story. Large numbers of working class children still leave school with little or no qualifications and African Caribbean boys in the school system appear at the ‘top the league’ in two areas. They are the lowest achievers of all groups when national examinations (GCSEs and ‘A’ levels) are taken into consideration; and are over-represented on the tables for children being excluded from school.

Of the Hackney parents who were interviewed, most seem to agree that:

- 1) The state of schools in Hackney is a disgrace:
- 2) It is a disgrace that hundreds of Hackney children this year (2006), can’t even find a place in a secondary school.
- 3) It is a disgrace that so many schools have to rely on agency teachers
- 4) It is a disgrace that libraries are closing all over the borough.

5) Private companies have been sent in to run Hackney's education before (a reference to Nord Anglia). 6) They have long gone. Most parents are not convinced that this private/ independent body (The Learning Trust) will be any different.

That if schools do not reflect the local community, and if there is no balanced intake in secondary schools, there will never be a balanced education system

Black parents interviewed felt that the education system seems to be harping back to the days when black children were seen as "educationally sub-normal" (Coard 1972). (One mother of three applied for a place at the London Nautical School – referred to as the naval college. Hers was one of four families from the same primary school to have applied for places at this Foundation school. Her child was rejected; the other three white children all received places at the school). Black parents in Hackney were under no illusion that their children have the same chance – as the white middle classes – to get into the high achieving London secondary schools.

5. Conclusion

Black parents are just as concerned about educational achievement as all other parents. The issue of school admissions has not been adequately dealt with and it is the view of the author that current practice encourages enclaves of privilege and ghettos of underachievement. Two sets of factors are easily isolated, social class / cultural capital, and poverty (Davies 2000). The first is explained through socio-economic status and mobility; the second is inhibiting as the 'disconnected' display less involvement in children's education at home.

Wragg (2003) has accurately summarised the present as a mixture of altruism and self-interest: "Education policies from both Labour and Conservative governments have polarised schools. Give top priority to league tables and test scores and better off, more mobile parents will move in next to, or even lie about living close by, the highest scoring schools. Consequently, schools at the bottom of the heap accrue more of society's downtrodden – free meal and special needs pupils increase. The free market separates rich and poor better than the finest sheepdog" (Wragg 2003, p. 10).

Who will be there to protect black and working class people when head-teachers of newly formed 'Trust' schools – wield absolute power through school admissions? Until all sections in our society join with the wider community in supporting the local schools; join with the teachers in their battle for higher educational expectations for children, nothing will change.

If our schools do not have balanced intakes, we could never have a balanced education system.

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