Black people must join forces to defeat racism and gain quality education for all, writes Bernard Coard 33 years on
07 November 2005

By Deborah Gabriel

Back in 1971 Grenadian-born academic Bernard Coard, wrote a seminal study entitled: 'How the West Indian child is made educationally subnormal by the British school system: the scandal of the black child in schools in Britain.

The study revealed the practice of Afro-Caribbean children, then referred to as 'West Indian' being labelled en masse as 'educationally subnormal’ and packed off to special schools called ESN (for educationally subnormal children). Bernard Coard highlighted the shocking statistics from a 1967 ILEA report that showed that in five of their secondary ESN schools, more than 30 per cent of the children were from immigrant families. By 1968 one of the schools derived 60 per cent of its pupils from among immigrant communities.

Bernard Coard wrote that many of the black children in these schools had been wrongly placed there with dire consequences:”The vast majority never get out and return to normal schools, they suffer academically and in their job prospects…” Coard said that special schools were designed to assist children to realise their “assumed low capabilities”, presuming that children assigned to ESN schools could not cope with the academic requirements of a normal school.

To be defined as ESN under the Education Act of 1921 a child had to be “very dull or backward.” The implications for the large numbers of Afro Caribbean children who were placed in ESN schools were far reaching and permanent. They left school with low educational attainment and the only jobs open to them were of a simple, repetitive nature, usually menial jobs. Low wages and poor housing were the result of being in many cases wrongly labelled as educationally subnormal.

The scandal of the situation, wrote Coard, was that even knowing that the problem existed, rather than abandon this policy the ILEA inspectorate in its report (657) wrote that “special schools for ESN children must continue to provide for immigration children, even those of relatively high IQ, until more suitable alternative provision can be made.”

Coard wrote that that there were three ways that teachers adversely affect the performance of black children:

“By being openly prejudiced, by being patronising and by having low expectations of the child’s abilities. Their effect on the black child is enormous and devastating.” Ahead of his time, among the changes Coard advocated was that black history and culture should be made part of the educational curriculum of all schools to benefit both black and white
children. Nursery schools should have black dolls, toys, pictures and story books about great black people, their achievements and inventions in order to instil a sense of pride and belonging.

Coard wrote: “Pride and self-confidence are the best armour against the prejudice and humiliating experiences which they will certainly face in school and in the society”, recommending that supplementary schools be set up across London and Britain and staffed by black students and teachers.

**Why Coard’s update inspired Brian Richardson to 'Tell it Like it Is’**

After writing his study which inspired community action and the emergence of supplementary schools across the country, Bernard Coard returned to Grenada and became involved in politics forming the New Jewel Movement Party (NJM) with long time friend, Maurice Bishop. For a time they enjoyed political success with NJM seeing Maurice Bishop rise to power as Prime Minister in 1979, with Coard his deputy. Improvements in public delivery of health, housing and education followed but a bloody political turmoil was not far behind.

In 1983 after Bishop and Coard fell out, a coup ensued allegedly led by Coard during which Bishop was killed. After seizing power briefly, The Americans, under the leadership of Ronald Reagan invaded Grenada and dissolved Coard’s government. Coard and 13 others were originally sentenced to death but later received life sentences. In February of this year the Eastern Caribbean Court of Appeals ruled that Coard and 13 others should remain in prison, over-turning an earlier decision which quashed their life sentences.

Now in his sixties, last year Coard wrote an insightful update to his earlier study from his prison cell entitled: *Thirty years on: where do we go from here?* This time around, Coard observes how education is used to maintain inequalities based on income and wealth, writing that providing quality education for “the poor and marginalised” in society will not only address these inequalities but "is the key to ending poverty.” He recommends that Britain does away with the present “multi-tiered system of education, providing differential education for the children of different classes, genders and ethnicities.”

The idea he stresses is not to “dumb down” the excellent standards of private schools but to “undertake the necessary steps to bring all schools up to the highest standards.” The problem with the present education system, writes Coard is that it is geared towards maintaining inequality and discrimination and “the vast majority of black and white working class children will not and cannot make it within this class and race-driven system.” Thirty-three years later Coard writes that this is now a battle for both black and white parents, community leaders, church groups, student bodies and the Trade Union Movement.

According to Coard: “Black people and their organisations, fighting by themselves in isolation from other forces which have common aims, will not get far.” Although some individual battles may be won, in order “to win the war of educational transformation...poverty elimination and defeat of racism...we must put sectarianism aside and join forces with all who have the same goals of an end to discrimination and
the establishment of high quality schools for all children.” At City Hall in London, at the recent launch of the book: *Tell it Like it Is: how our schools fail black children*, its editor Brian Richardson told Black Britain that Coard’s 2004 essay:

“Really encouraged myself and a number of others to reflect and think that the time is right to re-publish that book and to place it alongside the analysis of a number of people from a wide spectrum of backgrounds.” In the book, academics, young people and community activists, debate what has and hasn’t changed and what can be done collectively to make some kind of difference. Mr Richardson said:

“Coard’s original book and the original impact it had in galvanising supplementary schools, teaching unions and so on to do something, made a difference for a period of time.” He blames governments that followed, especially the Conservative governments of the 1980s for halting this progress, but believes a collective response is required to regain the momentum. Mr Richardson told Black Britain: “What I hope is that people will see the book as a tool and a starting point for debate, discussion and organisation.”

**The importance of parental and community involvement in education**

One of the chapters in *Tell it Like it Is*, was written by Professor Gus John, Chief Executive of the Gus John Partnership and long time activist for racial equality, social justice and educational reform. At the City Hall book launch, Grenadian-born Professor John told how he was one of the persons that organised the conference at which Bernard Coard delivered his original study.

Recalling how parents used to meet every fortnight at the West Indian Students Centre in Earl’s Court which became a Caribbean community education association, Professor John described it as “the beginning of the black working class movement in education and schooling in this country”, adding:“It beggars belief that we are effectively talking about the same kinds of things that we were dealing with in 1967; except that we had a much greater sense of urgency over matters facing us than we seem to do now.”

Writing in *Tell it Like it Is*, Professor John laments that in the last forty years education and under-achievement have become “racialised.” He quotes the example of Trevor Phillip’s suggestion that educating black boys separately might have a positive effect as he observed in the USA at the East St Louis School District in Missouri. What followed, writes Professor John was “a massively irrelevant debate about segregated black schools or segregation within schools. What is wrong with class sizes of no more than eight for some learning groups?

And why should not these learning groups be of black boys specifically or of Bangladeshi boys if their learning and development needs warrant it?” Professor John suggests there has been little attention paid to the successful methods employed by supplementary schools which have helped to build black boys’ self-esteem and also helped them to become successful learners. There are around 1500 supplementary and Saturday schools in England and Wales, 300 of which are London-based.

At the book launch Professor John told the audience that “year on year we see our children becoming casualties of the schooling system, we see them ending up in youth custody institutions, in prisons…and in the ranks of the unemployed.”
In *Tell it Like it Is* Professor John accuses successive governments over the last four decades of operating “structures which suggested that the problem lay with us as black people because of our immigrant status, backward language and backward ways.” The real problem though, he writes is that the government demands that schools deliver a curriculum that is not reflective of society but geared to “a mono-racial and mono-cultural environment.”

Such a policy makes no sense when in some cities in some parts of the country black and ethnic minority communities make up 25 and 50 per cent of the population. Echoing the sentiments of Bernard Coard, Professor John writes that it is not only black children who the education system is failing but increasingly “a growing number of children of all ethnicities.” Therefore “We must acknowledge and mobilise widespread support from within our communities and the wider society.” Seeking individual solutions as parents is not the answer, writes Professor John but is counter-productive in the long run. Instead what is needed is collective action in order “to tackle the appalling experiences so many young people have.”

The Parents and Students Empowerment Network (PASE) is an initiative that has evolved from the Communities Empowerment Network, a campaign and advocacy organisation under the directorship of Gerry German. Formed in January 2000, over the last five years it has dealt with 2826 cases, 67% of which relate to school exclusions. Ninety per cent of its clients are from black communities.Professor Gus John told the audience at City Hall, during the launch of *Tell it Like it Is*, that PASE has been a very effective tool for dealing with some of the problems faced by black pupils within the education system but much more support is needed.

*Article published by Colourful Network*