

# Can proposed school reforms really deliver black power?

07 February 2006 Deborah Gabriel

## Black parents 'marginalised' from involvement in schools

CRE chair Trevor Phillips said last week that government plans to introduce school trusts can address black under-achievement through greater involvement from black parents.

In an editorial in the Education Guardian Mr Phillips said that some black communities were on **"their third and fourth generations of failure"** and despite the fact that critics say the proposals will work against poor and disadvantaged children, black kids can actually benefit.

He described black parents as **"marginalised"** from the school system and that feeling **"outnumbered and outgunned"** is the reason many of them steer clear from any involvement.

According to the CRE chair the proposed schools White Paper can be a panacea for all this by **"harnessing black parents' expertise and commitment"** directly into the school system.

Mr Phillips wrote: **"Imagine networks of urban schools that deliver high standards and personalised education that ethnic minority parents have been demanding for years...the real potential of this paper could be to deliver true black power."**

Under reforms proposed by the White Paper parental involvement in the school system would be increased through the introduction of parent councils that would be able to demand new schools from the local education authorities.

Dr Lorna Cork, educational adviser and author of the book: *Supporting Black Pupils and Parents* told Black Britain that although education policies are not designed to address the particular needs of black parents:

**"Groups of black parents could use it as an opportunity to become much more influential in relation to their children's schooling."**

When asked whether Trevor Phillips was right to claim that black parents are marginalised from involvement in their children's schooling Dr Cork replied:

**"Yes black parents can feel marginalised and they can feel like they haven't been provided with enough key information about how the school system operates."**

**"The whole black parents' movement from the 1960s onwards developed as a result of black parents feeling marginalised."**

Dr Cork told Black Britain that the proposed parent councils could be used as a way of gathering more information that can help black parents to support their children and become more proactive in their education.

In her book: *Supporting Black Pupils and Parents* Dr Lorna Cork argues that black pupils are best supported within the school system by supporting their parents and by allowing and encouraging them to play an active role in their children's education.

## A black parent's plea: "make us feel more welcome"

Rosemary Brown from Bristol is a mother of five children, two of whom are currently in infant and junior school. Her experience of the education system mirrors that of many other black parents.

She told Black Britain: **“Unfortunately it hasn't got any easier to get as involved in school life as I would like. Politically I would have thought that involving black parents was a major issue at present but it seems that the schools are only playing lip service to it.”**

Ms Brown said that forging links with another black parent who is also keen to see more involvement by black parents has given her more confidence to challenge what is happening in her child's school.

Her first experience of enquiring at the school about parent groups **“met with a strange response”** when the first thing she was told was that she would be subject to a police check.

She discovered when she spoke to other black parents in the playground that some were not keen on joining a parents' group for fear of being labelled as troublemakers, saying they didn't want to rock the boat.

Others simply said their child was doing fine and they didn't want to get involved. Ms Brown said: **“I think that Trevor Phillips is right when he said that black parents are marginalised within the school system and I think it needed to be said.”**

The well-spoken mother of five told Black Britain that black parents and pupils **“are still being discriminated against”**, but because the discrimination is indirect: **“it is a lot harder to fight against.”**

She added: **“I don't like to make trouble but I'm finding now that making trouble or making people question what they're doing is the only way to change it.”**

Ms Brown told Black Britain that where a school has black teachers it is okay but if as in her school there are no black teachers **“straight away you're on the outside.”**

Whereas white parents had become learning mentors and classroom assistants, she said by contrast: **“black parents are noticeable by their absence.”**

She feels the problem is that many of the teachers at her children's school do not mix with black people as many of them are from outside Bristol. Giving an example Ms Brown said that although there is one particular teacher she is very comfortable with she has had real problems with other teachers:

**“Two of the other teachers I've had real problems with, they don't even talk to me. One of them, I'll be near her in the playground and she won't even make eye contact.”**

Speaking of her desire to become a school governor Ms Brown said that the prospect was quite daunting as the current governors are **“all male and white.”**

She told Black Britain: **“If you're in a minority and you're a woman as well it's quite difficult. They know the system...they know how everything works and it can be quite frightening.”**

Ms Brown feels it is important for black parents to get involved in the school system as **“the children can only gain.”** A lack of interest on the part of parents filters down to black pupils who themselves end up losing interest.

She said: **“There are a lot of valuable resources out there, black parents have a lot to give, but it's about making them feel welcome.”**

**No space for 'black power' in the proposed school trusts**

Gerry German is chair of the Communities Empowerment Network (CEN), a campaign and advocacy organisation that provides advice and support for people experiencing disadvantage (especially exclusions) in the school system.

Mr German told Black Britain: **“There is simply no space for Black Power in the Trust Schools, academies or special schools”**, adding: **“It is an idle dream to imagine that Black Power has any hope of flourishing in an educational system of divide and rule.”**

According to Mr German the White Paper will only sow further divisions between the rich and poor and both black and working class pupils will be the ones to lose out.

Chair of CEN Professor Gus John, has similarly strong views on the White Paper and wrote a critique of the proposals which is due to appear as a chapter in a forthcoming book.

In his critique, Professor John points out that in the 116 page document, only three paragraphs and half a page is devoted to **“Black and Minority Ethnic Children”**, branding the paper as **“white in every sense of the word.”**

Nothing is mentioned in the White Paper about the role that education has to play in tackling racism nor in **“preparing all children for living peaceably in and managing a multiracial society.”**

Professor John also blasts the school proposals for focusing on black pupils’ under-achievement and it’s simple pledge **“to provide every school with advice and support to meet the aspirations of BME parents and pupils”**.

He feels the government is misguided in thinking that strategies to raise the achievement of pupils generally will raise the attainment of black pupils. The reason, is:

**“Black students continue to be excluded in unacceptable numbers and schools feel under no obligation to prepare white students for living in multi-ethnic Britain, especially when they are located in all or mainly white areas.”**

Professor John said that it is ironic that because of the way racism manifests itself in society, people who hold management positions within the education system and head teachers **“are still predominantly white”**

It is essential, he said: **“That the Government’s White Paper proposals be subjected to the most rigorous race equality impact assessment.”**

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