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Challenges in raising primary Black children's achievement

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Background

The educational attainment of Black (notably African-Caribbean heritage) children in compulsory education in England has been a major concern over the past four decades. During this period many academic studies and government reports have been produced about the lower attainment of Black children and the impact that such attainment or lack of has on their future prospects (e.g. Coard, 1971; Bagley, 1979; Troyna, 1984; Swann, 1985; Wright, 1992; Gillborn and Gipps, 1996; Gillborn and Mirza, 2000; Majors, 2001; Tomlinson, 2003; Crozier, 2005; DfES, 2006a, b; Cabinet Office, 2007; Gillborn, 2008). These documents reflect widespread concern that a disproportionate number of Black children tend to underperform in public examinations in comparison to their White peers. Indeed an edited collection by Richardson (2005) discussed 'How Our Schools Fail Black Children'.

Despite this longstanding underachievement, research has shown that not all Black children underachieve (e.g. Demie, 2005; Rhamie, 2007). In recent years two government initiatives that have been introduced in schools to improve Black attainment and success are Aiming High (see Tikly et al., 2005) and the Black Children's Achievement Programme. The Black Children's Achievement programme was set up by the Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) to raise the achievement of Black primary aged children across England and consisted of two phases. Phase 1 began in 2005 and focused on African-Caribbean children in five local authorities across 22 schools. Following the commencement of Phase 1 it became clear that a focus solely on the achievement of African-Caribbean children was unsustainable because of identified lower attainment in other Black groups. This led to the successor programme which encompassed all Black groups, being rolled out in Phase 2 as the Black Children's Achievement (BCA) Programme. This renaming was considered essential if the achievement needs of all Black (i.e. Black African, Black Caribbean, Mixed White and Black Caribbean, Mixed White and Black African, and Black Other) children were to be met. Phase 2 formally launched in November 2006 with the addition of 15 further authorities. This resulted in over 100 schools taking part in the BCA programme (including the 22 involved in Phase I).

A small-scale qualitative evaluation covering the period 2006-2008 of the BCA programme was conducted with four participating local authorities and seven schools.

Research Questions

The evaluation sought to identify the effectiveness of the BCA programme and to highlight practices that have a particular impact on enhancing primary Black children's attainment by for example examining school approaches to teaching and learning, Black children's awareness of their heritage and identity, school culture and ethos, the engagement of Black children in their learning, and identify changes in practice and policy at the level of classroom, school and local authority that had an effect on Black children.

Methods

Over two years (2007-2008) semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from school and local authority staff and focus group discussions were conducted with pupils and parents/carers in the case study schools and local authorities. In the first year of the evaluation, school data collection concentrated on Black children in Years 2 and 5. In the second year, the focus moved to Black children in Years 3 and 6. The intention in the second year was to include children and staff who were interviewed the year before, but this was not always possible.

Across both years of the evaluation a total of 80 school staff, 194 children, 38 parents and 14 local authority staff participated in the evaluation research.

In addition to the above, a one-page questionnaire was distributed to whole class groups in Years 2 and Year 5 (not just Black children) to ascertain children's attitudes to school work/learning. The questionnaire was completed by 416 (218 Year 2 and 198 Year 5) children. Classroom observations were also conducted. These aimed to develop an understanding of how schools/teachers recognised and valued diverse cultures/ heritages and how children responded to lessons where this occurred. The observations focused on interactions between teachers and majority and minority ethnic children, and interactions between diverse groups of children.

Frame

The data was analysed in light of the evaluation remit outlined above with a view to identifying the main sources of changes in perceptions and understanding in relation to Black children's achievement, and identifying any similarities, differences or tensions in school and local authority perspectives, compared to understandings derived prior to school/local authority involvement in the BCA programme

Teacher constructions of Black children's achievement and their attitudes to raising Black children's attainment were examined as a means of identifying factors that contribute to persisting educational inequality amongst Black children

Research findings

The evaluation identified a number of challenges which not only affected implementation of the BCA programme, but which were likely to undermine efforts to reduce educational inequalities experienced by Black children. Although exploring teacher attitudes was not a key aspect of this evaluation it emerged as a salient issue with some teachers having negative attitudes/expectations and holding stereotypical views about the ability of Black children which led to difficulties in challenging negative attitudes and prejudice among school staff. The evaluation findings indicate that some of the case study teachers found targeting and concentrating support on Black children as a group to be problematic, which suggests that in some schools the strategy of targeting underachieving Black children was not well explained to teachers, many of whom seemed to believe that equality can be achieved by treating everyone identically. The findings also suggest that in developing more conducive staff attitudes to raising Black children's achievement, there needs to be better understanding amongst school staff that enhancing Black children's achievement and ultimately closing the attainment gap across ethnic groups might require different strategies.