0577

Catching hell, and doing well: the African Caribbean student journey to university

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Background

In his essay "Better 'Mus' Come": rethinking 'community as a radical social imaginary, Farrar (1999) argues that the term community is one which is used by people of all ethnic groups not simply as a demarcation between 'us' and 'them.' The term community also refer to spaces of learning, spaces to dream and to yearn. Historically, within the African-Caribbean community, yearnings for the future are often linked to educational achievements. Thus echoing the words of bell hooks who in her 1994 essay on education stated that , " The class room with all its limitations remain a location of possibility..." Parental influence, community projects and cultural activities were amongst the key factors cited by Hallam and Rhamie as contributing to the educational success of African-Caribbean people in the UK. This is not withstanding Chevannes & Reeves (1987:149) argument that the emergence of Saturday supplementary schools in the black community represents a collective strategy to combat the inadequate education available to black children. Stone (1981:238) describe these schools as grassroots activisim and that which is "reminiscent of the kind of activity amongst working-class socialist in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In their essay, Uncovering Genealogies of the Margins: The Black Supplementary schooling, Mirza and Reay (2000) describe these schools as being "far more radical and subversive than their quiet conformist exterior, indicating the presence of a covert movement for educational change".

Research Questions

In a research commissioned by the Cariocca Education Trust, a Manchester based community organisation, Edwards-Kerr (2005) found that although most African-Caribbean heritage pupils held positive beliefs about the importance of schooling, negative experiences of participation and belonging were likely to impact adversely on their levels of achievements. Of the 93 Black pupils that participated in the study, 26% reported that they have had fixed term exclusions. Black boys were also more likely to be in detention than any of the other groups. Edwards -Kerr further argued that this combination of exclusion and under attainment often led to black men entering university at an older age. As such, this small scale research represents an exploration of the relationship between community based political, social and cultural activities and the educational aspirations of African-Caribbean heritage men and women in Manchester. In her essay on "Teaching Community"(2003), bell hooks sees education as not only taking place in the class room but wherever people are . Wenger (1998:8) argue that learning 'is part of our participation in our communities'. Accordingly, the research explores the ways in which involvement in these areas of informal learning activities , has in turn informed their decision to pursue higher education courses by way of programmes such as Black Access, with its emphasis on identity and a sense of belonging.

Methods

Methods

The main purpose of the study is to collect qualitative data on the impact of community based informal learning activities on the decision by African-Caribbean heritage people and to enrol on university courses. This involves in depth interview with 10 participants from areas in Manchester such as Moss and Hulme, who have completed or is in the process of completing a university degree programme. The interview explores issues relating to school experiences, academic qualifications as well as their involvement in community projects and cultural activities

Frame

Data is analysed using a grounded theory approach and includes:

*Community Development Learning theory which advocates that as a developmental process the content of learning is that which is rooted in people's experience and the learning process is both inclusive and participatory

*Community of Practice theory whereby Wenger (1991) argue that mutual engagement, joint productive enterprise and a shared repertoire are the three dimensions which constitutes a community of practice.

 *Black identity development theories as in Cross (1991) and the DAISE model -   A synthesis of Cross (1971), Parham 1989) and Phinney (190) by Blackburn (2001)

*Freire's concept of critical consciousness particularly in relation to bell hooks work on "Education as the practice of Freedom".

 Lifelong learning and theories in relation to widening participation.

Research findings

Data collection at present is still ongoing, initial findings suggest a pattern where people perceive education as the most legitimate way forward in terms of transforming lives. Although there has been a growth of literature on the African Caribbean community in crisis: underachievement, gang crime, at the same time there is very little on the cultural capital within communities and how such capital is deployed within informal political, social and cultural activities, the impact this has on educational aspirations. The research will give insight into the ways in which these activities transgress boundaries between formal and informal learning, personal and professional identities to give greater understanding of how voice and belonging impact aspirations and shape possibilities of transformation.

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