

Diane Abbott MP

UN Forum on Minorities and the Right to Education

15<sup>th</sup> - 16<sup>th</sup> December 2008

Intro:

- Importance of education as a means of creating equality amongst a population – giving young people the tools with which they can access opportunities in later life, giving young people the opportunity to change their life situation.
- Lucky enough in the UK that there is a strong general consensus that equal access to education is vital BUT this does not necessarily play out in reality.

Black education:

- I have spent over 20 years campaigning for higher educational achievements amongst the Black and ethnic minority population in the UK.
- Issues that comes up time and time again is the over-representation of young Black people being excluded from school, the lower grades they receive at benchmark exams such as SATs and GCSE and the lack of diversity in the UK teaching workforce, particularly in ethnically diverse areas like London.
- *School exclusions*: A former director general of the prison service said in 2001 “The 13,000 young people excluded from school each year might as well be given a date by which to join the prison service some time later down the line”. School exclusions are a serious problem – children who are excluded are much more likely to never receive a full education, to be unemployed and even to fall into crime. There is a possibility that Black children – particularly boys – are excluded from school more than their peers as a result of some form of institutional racism: being assumed to be more violent/disruptive/unruly than their peers.
- *Lower grades*: Although the situation has improved in recent years, Afro-Caribbean children, and boys in particular, still fall behind their peers in tests and exam results. Research has found that whilst black children outperform their

white peers at the start of school, but fall behind afterwards. Black children are more likely to be punished in schools, and more severely so. They are more likely to be put in lower sets and more likely to be categorised as having special educational needs.

- *Diversity in teaching:* Many of the problems faced by Black and ethnic minority schoolchildren in the UK could be helped by a more diverse teaching workforce. Research has shown that teachers in the UK feel they have not had sufficient diversity training, or do not feel qualified to teach in diverse areas. However, newly qualified teachers from other parts of the UK travel to London where there are lots of jobs going. Many of these will not have had experience of communicating with a diverse range of people in their personal lives, and may not have received sufficient diversity training during their teacher training. Having a diverse range of teachers means that the teaching workforce has a good intellectual and emotional understanding of the children they are teaching. It is also important that children see people in authority that look like them, that come from their cultural background. There is also a problem in the UK with an ethnic imbalance in governing bodies. These bodies have a distinct influence over the working of the school and it is wrong that they are not more representative of the school population. Empowering parents is important but not if it means only empowering a certain section of parents – the loudest, most educated and middle-class parents.
- *Parent-teacher relations:* One of the main purposes of the LSBC annual conference (attended by approximately 2,000 parents, children and educators every year) is to help parents to engage in their child's education and school. For many parents, the UK education system is a closed book. Either they are newly arrived in this country and have not been through the system themselves, or they have had a negative experience in the UK education system. Helping parents to take more control over their child's education means the child has clear goals and support in their education. Communication with schools is vital, as is understanding the system to best help the child.

Policy and legislative framework:

- One of the main problems with black and ethnic minority education has historically been the lack of drive shown by government to take action specifically aimed at these communities. It is only in recent years (and after years of campaigning) that the current Labour Government has decided to have specific schemes aimed at raising levels of attainment for black students. The problem is that generalised schemes tend to overlook the specific problems faced by specific groups of students. In order to create an even playing field specific programmes must be used.
- However, once the Labour government agreed to look into the specific problem of Black and ethnic minority under-achievement, they refused to set targets for improvement. This effectively just leaves recommendations, reports and proposals but little action – or effective way of monitoring progress.
- In less direct ways, policies relating to black and ethnic minorities have an effect on the education of their children:
  - Removing the right to free English lessons for immigrants with the right to remain in the country
  - Restricting the rights of foreign teachers to work in British schools – e.g. most recently with Caribbean teachers whose immigration status was put under jeopardy because they were asked to have a UK qualification (for which they had to pay). Beyond the Commonwealth, there are thousands of qualified teachers (e.g. who come to the UK as refugees) who are not allowed to teach without a UK qualification.
  - Not giving enough funding for schools with a high intake of immigration children, therefore leading to a shortfall for specialist language services for example. Also, this has led to tensions between the white British population and immigrant populations.
  - Strict immigration controls mean that children of immigrants are in a vulnerable position: they may be put into detention centres, deported etc or live under fear of being removed from the country.
  - New welfare rules will mean that single parents will face more pressure to return to work. Single parents of children above one year old will have to begin the job-searching process (CV-writing, interview training etc) and will be forced to take on 4 weeks of full-time work (voluntary or otherwise) or to train/retrain.

