Narratives of High-Attaining African Caribbean Boys: Perceptions of Peer and Family Influences in Education

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The underachievement of African Caribbean boys has been the subject of considerable debate and research in education, but few studies focus on this group's achievements. Difficulties associated with racial identity and masculinity are amongst explanations offered for African Caribbean boys' educational underachievement, and research has also implicated the peer group's contributions to undermining academic performance.

This study explored the subjective experiences of seven high-attaining African Caribbean boys, aged 14 to 15 from one secondary school, regarding their perceptions of peer influences in school. Participants were given two narrative interviews, two months apart, about their relationships with peers and experiences related to "peer influence" and the impact they consider that this has on their education and attainment. Interviews also addressed the impact of family narratives on the boys at school. The interviews were analysed using Gee's (1991) structural linguistic narrative approach, which as well as helping to identify narratives also allowed analysis of how the boys performed their identities in co-constructing their narratives with the interviewer.

The findings suggest that the boys perceived peers to have some influence on their educational experiences and subsequent attainment, though family influences were stronger on the boys' educational values. Narratives espoused the positive aspects of peer relationships as being emotionally and practically supportive and helping boys' motivation to study through competing for high grades. Pupils used multiple and complex strategies to manage their relationships so that they continued to attain well. These included strategic self-presentation, deploying resources and utilising support from teachers and family members. Family racialised narratives were found to play an important role in developing racial identity and academic orientation. Implications for educational psychology practice and pedagogy in schools are discussed.

Keywords: African Caribbean boys, black boys, peer group, peer influence, African Caribbean achievement, identity, masculinity, motivation, narrative methodology

Introduction

This introduction presents the current issues relevant to the education of African Caribbean boys and the dominant discourses around their academic achievement. A review of the existing literature will explore some of the issues raised by research on peer-group and family influences in education along with factors which are important, such as motivation, identity and masculinity, to African Caribbean male pupils' experiences of peer influence on their attainment.

Education literature has highlighted the Black male underachievement problem since the 1960s (Coard, 1971; Taylor, 1981), and much research still focuses on the relative underachievement of this group (MacDonald, 2001), despite them having made gains in education (Department for Education and Employment, 1999). Research has suggested that the achievement gap is reducing, with African Caribbean pupils showing consistent gains in educational achievement between Key stages 3 and 4 (Kingdon & Cassen, 2010). Gillborn (1990) highlighted that African Caribbean males are performing better in school than their predecessors but are still often falling behind other ethnic groups. Nonetheless, how attainment is measured and pupils are ethnically categorised can influence the achievement levels reported (Gillborn, 1990; Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2003; Reed, 1999), and institutional racism and teacher low perceptions have also been implicated in the problem (Phillips, 2011; Tikly et al., 2006).

The "Aiming High: Raising the Achievement of Minority Ethnic Pupils" report (DfES, 2003) highlighted issues around the over-representation of African Caribbean boys in permanent exclusion rates and special schools, and their vulnerability to involvement in crime that impact upon attainment levels. Findings from the "Getting it. Getting it right" (DfES, 2006) review supported the view that racial inequalities exist in education and that Caribbean boys find "street culture" and anti-academic lifestyles persuasive (DfES, 2006, p. 12). This highlights the importance of the educational context, in which schools' practices and treatment of Black boys, as well

as pupils' subjective attitudes and values, impact on their educational attainment.

Black Caribbean academic success is an under-researched area (Byfield, 2008). Few studies in the UK have sought to identify factors that support and promote success (Rhamie & Hallam, 2002) and the focus on underachievement has had little impact on recommendations to change the state of affairs (Rhamie & Hallam, 2002). Researchers suggest that African Caribbean individuals' inability to manage peer-group pressures contributes to the issue of African Caribbean underachievement (Sewell, 2001). However, despite being subject to peer influences (Whiting, 2009) some African Caribbean boys are managing to attain well in education; so how do they achieve this? To assist in answering this question, it may be helpful to study African Caribbean boys who are achieving to explore their experiences and skills in negotiating their identities within school spaces.

The Role of Peers

A substantial proportion of children's lives are spent socialising with peers, and the ability to form and maintain friendships has implications for, and is important in, children's emotional, psychological and cognitive development (Rosenthal, 1993). Within schools, there is a complex matrix of social networks, in which pupils are flexible members (Cotterell, 2007). The literature has documented peer effects in the academic outcomes of young people (Robertson & Symons, 2003; Whiting, 2009) in addition to health-related behaviours (Lynskey et al., 1998) and risk-taking (Jaccard et al., 2005). Research shows a link between peer relationship problems and psychopathology (Deater-Deckard, 2001) and peer rejection can lead young people to internalise problems that can develop into psychopathological conditions, for example, depression.

Achievement goal theory asserts that individuals can be oriented towards two types of goals: mastery, concerned with the learning of a task, and performance, which involves social comparison and competition to demonstrate competence and ability (Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006). Self-determination theory further suggests that one must feel a connection between oneself and one's social environment and be competent and in control of one's actions in order to experience motivation (Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006). Academic motivation, therefore, involves social appraisal and comparison processes, self-esteem and competence, and peers can be instrumental in developing and supporting these elements that play a crucial role in adolescents' educational outcomes.

Peer Influences

Although the dominant discourse is that adolescent peers have negative effects on academic achievement (Bottrell, 2009), they can also positively influence motivation and achievement (Cotterell, 2007). Pupils' motivation to succeed in education can result from interactions between individuals and their social context (Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006). Furthermore, they can influence how pupils feel about school, and friendship security can impact upon pupils' attention and participation in class (Cotterell, 2007).

Pupils' attitudes towards education vary with those of their social group (Ryan, 2001), and friends often share similar attitudes and behaviours (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011). Studies investigating the underachievement of ethnic minority groups have proposed that peers have a strong force that can affect individuals' aspirations, attitudes and behaviours (Cassen & Kingdon, 2007; Ford et al., 2008). Research on the underachievement of African Caribbean boys also implicates peers as an important influence (Sewell, 2000, 2001), and the literature is divided between positive and negative peer influences. Their perceived need for nurture, to be respected, popular, acquire social status and uphold preferred reputations in line with "cool" peers can be stronger than desires and pressures to fall in line with school expectations for behaviour and achievement (Phoenix, 2000; Sewell, 2000, 2001).

Black high-achieving pupils have been theorised to face a dilemma in which they experience positive feelings associated with their high academic performance but paradoxical psychological distress, isolation and rejection from their peers because of it (Grantham & Ford, 2003). Grantham and Ford (2003) proposed that the affective dissonance experienced by high-achieving Black students leads them to undermine their achievements and sabotage their own success; their psychological need for affiliation and acceptance may be greater than their need for academic achievement. Theories around masculinity and racial identity are amongst the explanations offered for African Caribbean boys' relative underachievement and are, therefore, central to any investigation of peer influences.

Masculinity and Identity Theories

One issue in the masculinity debate is that performances of masculinity are constructed in social interactions, and boys respond to, negotiate and position themselves in relation to dominant or idealised forms of masculinity, termed "hegemonic masculinity" (Frosh et al., 2002). These constructions of masculinity are also influenced by the number of resources individuals have available (Swain, 2006).

Black pupils' school experiences are mediated by their gendered identities and affect the relationships they are able to form with their peers (Wright et al., 1998). Researchers have commented on the social processes that might underlie the trends observed in Black academic attainment (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Horvat & Lewis, 2003; Sewell, 2001) and have suggested that circumscribed views of Black masculinities as embodying "machismo" and hegemony pathologises

Black boys' responses to school experiences (Wright et al., 1998). The research evidence available suggests that African Caribbean boys actively contribute towards their low educational performance through hyper-masculine behaviours which include rejecting academic values and schoolwork, the orientation to which is seen as feminine (Frosh et al., 2002; C. Jackson, 2003; Parry, 1997).

Horvat and Lewis (2003) suggested that some Black students use strategies that allow them to "manage" academic success in order to resist peer pressures to underperform. Their study found that Black female students in their senior high school navigated between different peer groups and actively negotiated their academic success within and between them, playing down their achievements to peers who were less academically successful but sharing their success and showing support to peers who were like-minded and successful (Horvat & Lewis, 2003). The authors argued that students resisted peer pressures and Black stereotypes and that they strategically "managed" their school success. Peers could also be helpful in supporting academic achievement by developing a healthy sense of competition.

Grantham and Ford (2003) defined racial identity as how much people value, understand and are aware of their racial heritage. A strong sense of racial identity can positively impact on self-esteem and subsequently affect educational work ethic and goal achievement (Byfield, 2008), and might underlie pupils' academic performance (Ford, 1996; Grantham & Ford, 2003). Being able to identify with a group can either exacerbate or buffer the effects of discrimination (Chavous et al., 2003) but if Black pupils do not have a healthy sense of racial identity they are more likely to surrender to negative peer pressure (Grantham & Ford, 2003). Such findings have led to recommendations, for example, mentoring programmes, to equip Black pupils with problem-solving and conflict-resolution strategies to overcome difficult peer interactions and reduce some of the social barriers to their achievement (Grantham & Ford, 2003; Sewell, 2001; Whiting, 2009).

The Role of Families

Attachment research has implicated the parental relationship in developing children's social skills and peer support-seeking behaviours (Allen et al., 2007). Adolescents who are able to seek social support are better able to cope with challenges (Hampel & Peterman, 2005; Herman-Stabl et al., 1995). Consequently, parents' attachment can affect adolescents' ability to develop supportive peer relationships which impacts on their coping skills and resilience.

Writers have argued that Black families develop "respectability status" (Wright et al., 2010, p. 64) to counter the negative assumptions and ideas that are projected onto them. This leads to some Black youths working to disprove negative stereotypes. In addition, strengths found

within Black families are trans-generational and thought to develop from historical experiences associated with struggle and racism (Wright et al., 2010) and studies have noted a strong culture of close bonding, academic orientation (Ford, 1993; Hill, 1972) and resilience within them (Wright et al., 2010). Wright (2010, p. 14) reported that Black youths perceived that "vigilant maternal intervention" supported their academic focus and aspirations. Ford (1993, p. 60) writes "The messages Black parents directly and indirectly communicate to their children regarding school achievement — and children's perceptions or interpretations of those messages — influence children's subsequent achievement orientation."

Rationale for the Current Study

Whilst a number of researchers have attempted to offer theories about the academic achievement of Black pupils, particularly, in relation to racial and scholar identity development, peer and academic success management, and masculinity, little research explores the positive effects of peers on Black pupils, for whom underachievement has long been documented in educational research. Crucially, the majority of research that has contributed towards our understanding of the experiences of academically successful Black males is from the USA and/or have been retrospective accounts. Consequently, the theories proposed may not necessarily fit with the UK population, given differences in the countries' ethnic compositions, education systems, cultural norms and immigration histories.

Little research has focused on the subjective experiences of high-attaining African Caribbean males in secondary education in the UK. There is a need for research that can develop understandings of the social processes that can impact upon achievement in academic settings for African Caribbean boys (Hallam & Rhamie, 2003) and represent pupils' perspectives; as Ford et al. (2008) highlighted, "Perceptions are a powerful determinant of behaviors" (Ford et al., 2008, p. 224). Research should seek to investigate how to capitalise on the positive effects of some peer relationships and ameliorate the negative influence of others (Ryan, 2001), but also consider how family influences work alongside peer group influences.

Perspectives on the academic achievement of Black pupils rarely integrate concepts of individual characteristics or identity, diversity, culture and context (Spencer et al., 2001) and, therefore, do not offer a holistic account of the experiences of Black pupils in education. Applying a narrative methodology to the study of boys' relationships, and the impact of their influences and school experiences, could offer the literature insight into pupils' interpretations of their social experiences and the resources they employ to manage them in order to maintain their academic attainment.

Aims and Objectives

This study aimed to provide insights into the issue of African Caribbean achievement by investigating the perceptions of peer-group and family influences through the narratives of high-attaining African Caribbean males, to offer an account of the impact that these might have on individuals' behaviours and motivations to be academically successful. Developing an understanding of these boys' experiences within educational psychology research highlights important implications for schools, education policy, educational psychology practice and the communities it serves.

Accordingly, the present study answered the following research questions.

1. Do 14- to 15-year-old boys who are attaining well (i.e., they have achieved level 7+ in their English, Mathematics and Science Key Stage 3 SATs) consider that their experiences and relationships with their peers impact upon their education? If so, how, and how do the boys feel about this?

2. How do the boys manage their peer relationships?

3. How do family narratives impact on the boys' views about school and their attainment?

Method

Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design, positioned within a critical realism ontology, using experience-centred narrative interviews to explore the perspectives of African Caribbean boys in relation to their experiences of peer and family influences in their education.

Participants

Seven African Caribbean male pupils aged 14 to 15 were selected for this study, via recruitment from one outer-London comprehensive secondary school, who met criteria for inclusion in the sample. The pupils all had at least one parent self-reported to be of African Caribbean ethnic background and had achieved Level 7 in Key Stage 3 SATs in Mathematics, English and Science.

Participants are given pseudonyms in this article to protect their identities.

Procedure

Participants were interviewed individually for one hour on two occasions, three months apart. An aide-memoire was used to support the structure of the first interview and was adapted for use in the second.

Analysis

Gee's (1991) Structural Linguistic Narrative Analysis was used to structure and analyse transcribed data (see Gee, 1991, p. 28 for details). This involved five levels of analysis:

1. Organising and restructuring transcribed data into stanzas, strophes and parts using transcribing conventions.

2. Exploration and analysis of the linguistic markers that conveyed participants' meaning-making.

3. Analysis of main and subordinate plots within participants' narratives.

4. Identification of the "psychological subject" within participants' narratives and their positioning in reference to the narratives shared.

5. Interpretation of themes in the data, both within participants' interview data and across them.

Findings and Discussion

(1) Do 14- to 15-year-old boys who are attaining well consider that their experiences and relationships with their peers impact upon their education? If so, how, and how do the boys feel about this?

Consistent with previous research (Berndt & Keefe, 1995), peers' engagement, motivation and attainment were considerations for the boys when selecting peers to befriend. All boys in the study reported having good friendships in school, based on common interests and views about education, and that they considered their friends' future prospects and their potential to boost their own chances of success when selecting their friends. This complements research showing that friends can offer social support that reinforces their perceptions of opportunity and educational expectations (Wall et al., 1999). All boys viewed themselves as similar to their closest peers, for example, having "the same mentality", and their narratives supported findings elsewhere that peer-group members share similar characteristics and behaviours (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011; Kiuru et al., 2010; Ryan, 2001). However, in contrast to other research (Ryan, 2001), the boys had differentiated peer groups, maintaining friendships with both high-attaining and less academically successful peers.

Whilst research has shown that peers can influence pupils' educational values and aspirations (Robertson & Symons, 2003) and Michael perceived his peers as being influential in his positive views on education and in having aspirational goals in common with his own, the other boys felt this mindset was influenced by family members and teachers. In contrast to the dominant discourses that peers in adolescence influence individuals to engage in deviant and anti-school behaviours (Bottrell, 2009; Cullingford & Morrison, 1997) and

that, particularly for Black boys, peers impact negatively on educational attainment, the boys in this study reported being motivated and inspired by their friends. Peers provided models for learning behaviours and academic engagement. Moreover, the boys worked to inspire other Black pupils as role models, further motivating them to achieve and succeed in education. This highlighted that peer influence is bidirectional. Joseph shared his sense of responsibility in helping his friends who were less academically inclined, stating:

> I wanna be a successful PERSON
>
> So, like, YOUNGER BLACK people/ can look up to me/ when I'm OLDER

Junior and Nigel alluded to the affective benefits of their peer relationships: their closest friends offered them security and reassurance, particularly, in critical times, for example, transition into secondary school. Luke and Shaun discussed their friends' emotional support which helped them to manage school pressures, as Shaun shared:

> When I THINK too much/ it OVERLOADS/ in my HEAD
>
> And sometimes/ they can help calm me down
>
> And like, just talk things out/ with me (.)

There was evidence that some boys can and do communicate negative emotional states, for example, stress, to their friends and draw on social support, allowing them to cope with challenges in adolescence, and this has positive implications for mental health (Hampel & Peterman, 2005; Herman-Stabl et al., 1995). This finding challenges the view that boys tend to self-disclose less (Maccoby, 1990) and be less relational in their friendships than girls (Cross & Madson, 1997).

Michael, Luke, Chris and Joseph referred to peers' practical support with revision and homework and felt these were mutually beneficial gains from their friendships. Their narratives indicated that assistance with work was openly given and received and that they capitalised on opportunities to engage in peer-mediated learning, seeking support from peers with greater knowledge in specific subject areas. They also shared a culture in which friends could show pride in their academic achievements.

Some boys shared implicit positive influences of the peer group in terms of providing motivation to study through modelling, inspiring and spurring them on, in sports and the arts as well as academia. Joseph shared that he was not always self-motivated to revise but would, reluctantly, to avoid boredom and loneliness at break times while his friends studied.

All boys thought their friendships were important in helping them to achieve and do better in school, and all but one subscribed to hegemonic masculine competitiveness, sharing positive perceptions of this. Nigel said:

> So it's like-/ it can ALMOST BE
>
> Like a CONTEST/ to be the BEST
>
> It'd be like/ AH, I got THIS/ what did YOU GET?
>
> Next time/ I'll get more than you, like

For most boys, competition appeared important in the maintenance of academic attainment and progress. Friends set aspirational benchmarks for high grades, giving the boys impetus and motivation to continually improve and surpass their friends' attainments. Some pupils are motivated through social comparison and are oriented towards performance goals, as has been suggested elsewhere (Horvat & Lewis, 2003; Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006). Other boys resisted engaging in such practices which might have masked failure at occupying hegemonic masculinity.

Consistent with the literature (Cotterell, 2007), some boys' narratives provided evidence that insecurities in peer relationships can make pupils reluctant to attend school and affect their educational participation. Two boys talked about difficulties after transition to secondary school in year 7 with adjusting to the new peer cultures. Nigel had to learn the social norms of the new school, and managing fears of threats from peers impacted on his feelings about attending.

Junior's narrative described some implicit negative peer influences, but his observations of peers not getting into much trouble for negative behaviours meant he saw this as an incentive to copy them. Other boys shared that peers were particularly distracting in lessons and impacted on their achievement in year 7. Some narratives implicated peers with poor educational and social outcomes as modelling educational disengagement and disaffection, although the boys were able to vicariously learn from friends' negative experiences. This fits existing literature implicating the role of peers in the vicarious acquisition of information concerning social skills and behaviour (Reijntjes et al., 2006). However, the data here suggests that observing peers' poor outcomes can deter some pupils from engaging in similar negative behaviours, and most boys presented confidence in themselves as individuals and their own abilities which may further be protective against peer influences (Connor, 1994).

Mothers, Siblings and Teachers as Buffers

All boys felt that their family relationships impacted their friendships by buffering peers' potential influence. They particularly highlighted their mothers' role in supervising or dissuading certain social activities. Allen et al. (2007) showed that adolescents' attachment security was positively correlated with their quality of peer relationships and popularity, and negatively correlated with negative peer pressure. This suggests the boys had secure attachments, as their narratives around managing peer pressure, acquiring popularity and being able to seek emotional support from friends also reflect.

Michael and Junior recalled that their siblings offered emotional support and advice to help manage negative influences and their friendships. This suggests that peer influences in adolescents' education is a much more complex story than has been theorised and boys are impacted on by family influences too. The boys maintained strong family ties and were motivated to meet high family expectations and make members proud of them, consistent with existing literature (Hébert et al., 2009; Rhamie & Hallam, 2002). It may be that for some African Caribbean boys to be educationally successful, the support, monitoring and interest of the family need to be salient.

Research has highlighted that some teachers stereotype and discriminate against African Caribbean pupils (Thomas et al., 2009) and that their low expectations and communication of their attitudes towards pupils can affect pupils' esteem and contribute to their academic performance (Foster, 1992). Shaun and Nigel shared conversations with teachers who had either negatively stereotyped them with other Black boys or set them apart as exceptional to this group, and their awareness of teacher perceptions, as has been demonstrated in other studies (see Tikly et al., 2006), led to the boys acting in ways to change them. This included distancing themselves from lower-achieving Black friends.

(2) How do the boys manage their peer relationships?

Performing Multiple Identities

The boys' awareness of and sensitivity to peer-group differences meant they adapted their behaviour to fit in and be socially included. The finding that pupils negotiate different public identities and social positions in different contexts has been noted elsewhere; Reynolds (2004, p. 13) described Caribbean young people as "carving out multiple ethnic identities that are not fixed into a specific location".

Luke and Shaun negotiated their identities within different contexts in school and were aware of their identity performances and others' perceptions of them. They purposefully created characters for themselves and occupied different social positions to different ends. Luke said:

> Well some of my friends/ think I'm DUMB
>
> 'Cos I act out/ at, like, break times and lunch times
>
> But MOST OF THEM/ IN MY CLASS
>
> They ask me for ADVICE
>
> So I think they know the score

Junior's narratives conveyed his intentions to keep his studying hidden from a peer group within which he had acquired status for being the "baddest". His denial of his studious activities indicated his perceptions of the group's social constraints: that he could not be honest about studying. He

shared his interaction with one pupil whilst in the presence of his "bad" peer group, and his later response:

> Ah, are you COMING LIBRARY?
>
> I'll be like/ are you MAD?
>
> I don't GO LIBRARY
>
> And they'd be like/ you was in there TODAY-
>
> I'm like/ NAH I WASN'T/ you must be DREAMING
>
> RUN to her the NEXT DAY/ or like, a minute later and say
>
> Ah, yeah/ don't watch that/ I'll come library tomorrow innit?
>
> [laughs] And I have to cover my tracks/ like that AGAIN (.)
>
> So it was kinda like jog-/ JUGGLING/ yeah

Junior's description of his experience as being like "juggling" reinforces the idea that public identity performances can conflict and place great demands on individuals' skills to keep up with managing them.

Separation and Distancing as Resistance

Joseph and Junior were aware of peers' potential impact on their education and future and used distancing and separation as strategies to manage peer pressures to smoke and become involved in gang activity. Joseph acknowledged his vulnerability to peer influences and thought the best way to avoid engaging in negative behaviours was to distance and separate himself altogether from certain peers.

Strategic Self-Presentation

Adolescents use self-presentation strategies to manage others' perceptions of them (Carr, 2011), and the boys in this study used strategic self-presentation to manage teacher perceptions as being academically achieving, and peer perceptions as being relatable and popular. Most boys denied experiencing peer pressure and these perceptions likely impacted on their views about school and their engagement with peers and education.

Shaun observed the dynamics of his peer group and their behavioural expectations. His understanding of social processes made him cognisant of his own behaviour within the peer group to skilfully manage peer pressure, stating that his acting skills helped him with this. Shaun could control others' impressions and perceptions of him by masking his feelings of stress and anger, a strategy to preserve his hard-earned reputation as popular and "having it all".

Some boys' physical attributes could be strategically used to their advantage in automatically presenting them as hegemonic, that is, having an athletic build, being tall and strong. Luke's narrative appealed to his masculinity, explaining that:

I'm bigger than-/ I'm taller than most of the people/ in my YEAR

So they probably think that I'm more-/ I'm physically

More physically CAPABLE than them

So if they try and PUSH ME/ they think I won't MOVE

And, like-/ so I just/ use that to my ADVANTAGE

When people try and peer pressure me into stuff

Luke suggests that an alternative way of managing peer relationships and influences is to use one's natural resources to manage social situations and resist peer pressure. There is evidence that the experiences related to these African Caribbean boys' identities are racialised and gendered and, similar to other studies (Wright et al., 1998), the ways in which they performed their masculinities within school affected their peer relationships and educational performance.

(3) How do family narratives impact on the boys' views about school and their attainment?

All boys shared their families' narratives around education and the impact that role models within the family and historical Black leaders had on their views about getting a good education. Two boys recounted their grandparents' racialised struggles associated with getting an education, while other boys identified parents and wider family members as being strong sources of influence in less direct ways and learned vicariously from both their positive and negative experiences.

The boys co-constructed their identities in the interviews through rich family narratives of triumph over racism, hardworking ethic, academic orientation and resulting achievement. Their identities were shaped by their families' experiences, and narratives espoused their racial and cultural understandings and allegiances. Nigel recalled his grandparents' narratives that gave him balanced representations of their achievement experiences:

A lot of STORIES have been told

From, like/ GRANDPARENTS

About how it's been hard/ erm, fighting RACISM-

Stuff like that/ erm, ALSO

They ALSO tell you about how their life was successful

But they tell me about/ also how they FAILED in life (..)

A lot of the time/ I think about it

In my head, like/ I'm not gonna DO that-

Family narratives embody the cultural norms, expectations and values of preceding generations, and the long-established oral traditions of African and Caribbean people through slavery (J. V. Jackson & Cothran, 2003) kept their histories alive, passing down tales of significant events. This study suggests these oral traditions are being maintained in some African Caribbean families in the UK and can help to ground and reinforce some young people's ethnic identities and moral stances (Edwards et al., 2003; Holland et al., 2007; Reynolds, 2004).

Some African Caribbean families use both "bonding" and "bridging" social capital to maintain strong kinship ties and act with a sense of collective good by acting as role models and reinforcing ethnic identities (Reynolds, 2004; Sewell, 1997). A finding consistent with previous research (see Reay, 2000; Wright et al., 2010) was that mothers were influential in sharing family members' successes and failures with the boys and orienting them towards academic success. Whilst Luke talked about wanting to emulate other family members' achievements, Junior described observing his parents' fatigue from working long hours and not having the jobs they could have had due to low academic attainment. They reflected on these family experiences as being influential, to have or avoid the same, and these were strong motivations for their academic focus.

Conclusions and Implications

This study demonstrated that some African Caribbean boys in the UK perceive that they experience both positive and negative peer influences on their achievement in secondary education. Social difficulties associated with secondary transition suggest that school interventions could target support for some pupils during this time. Some African Caribbean boys use complex and effortful strategies and perform multiple identities in differentiated peer groups and educational spaces, drawing on their physical attributes, skills and resources, as well as their family experiences, to help them manage peer relationships and influences to maintain their achievement. However, this could lead to stress and internalising emotions, requiring intervention through mentoring and coaching schemes. This research has merely scratched the surface in presenting the challenges that some African Caribbean boys face in being both high-attaining and respected members of their masculine peer groups, though the findings suggest that narrative is a helpful approach to present the voices of marginalised groups and provide deeper understandings of how some of these challenges might be mitigated.

Educational psychologists (EPs) should be mindful of the complexity in African Caribbean boys' experiences when working with them, as there are many factors that impact on their educational experiences and attainment other than their cognitive abilities. In practice, EPs should routinely explore

cultural and family narratives around educational achievement, as these can be important in maintaining academic behaviours and attitudes and could usefully deliver interventions targeting developing parents' values and educational aspirations to raise African Caribbean boys' achievements. EPs also have a role to play in challenging teacher stereotypes and thin narratives that contribute towards discriminatory practices that have long been documented to affect African Caribbean boys.

The pedagogy of educational institutions can impact upon pupils' perceptions of their ethnic identities, and positive messages about Black success should be addressed and embedded within a wider, more inclusive curriculum (Demie, 2005). This would endorse positive ethnic identities and may support pupils' resilience.

It is hoped that this narrative study offers the academic literature new food for thought and that EPs might embrace this methodology to develop their practice and insights into complex educational and social issues.

Limitations

The study's limitations relate to the narrative methodology: that the co-construction of narratives during interviews is impacted on by the researcher. The structuralist linguistic approach to narrative analysis assumes a position of over-interpretation and sense-making in people's narratives; thus, the linguistic devices used to structure them are all assumed to be functional and have significant meaning. However, these are subject to the researcher's interpretation and rely on individuals' recollections and willingness to share them. Finally, the findings are not generalisable to the wider community beyond the study sample.

Directions for Future Research

This study could be repeated with boys from various racial and cultural backgrounds to ascertain whether the schooling and social experiences of African Caribbean boys are unique and/or racialised. Peer and teacher relationships could be explored in interviews to shed greater light on masculinity and identity issues. Future research might consider replicating this study with underachieving boys, capitalising on the potential of the methodology to provide intervention and help boys to reflect on their experiences, re-author their histories and orient them to more positive and successful futures.

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