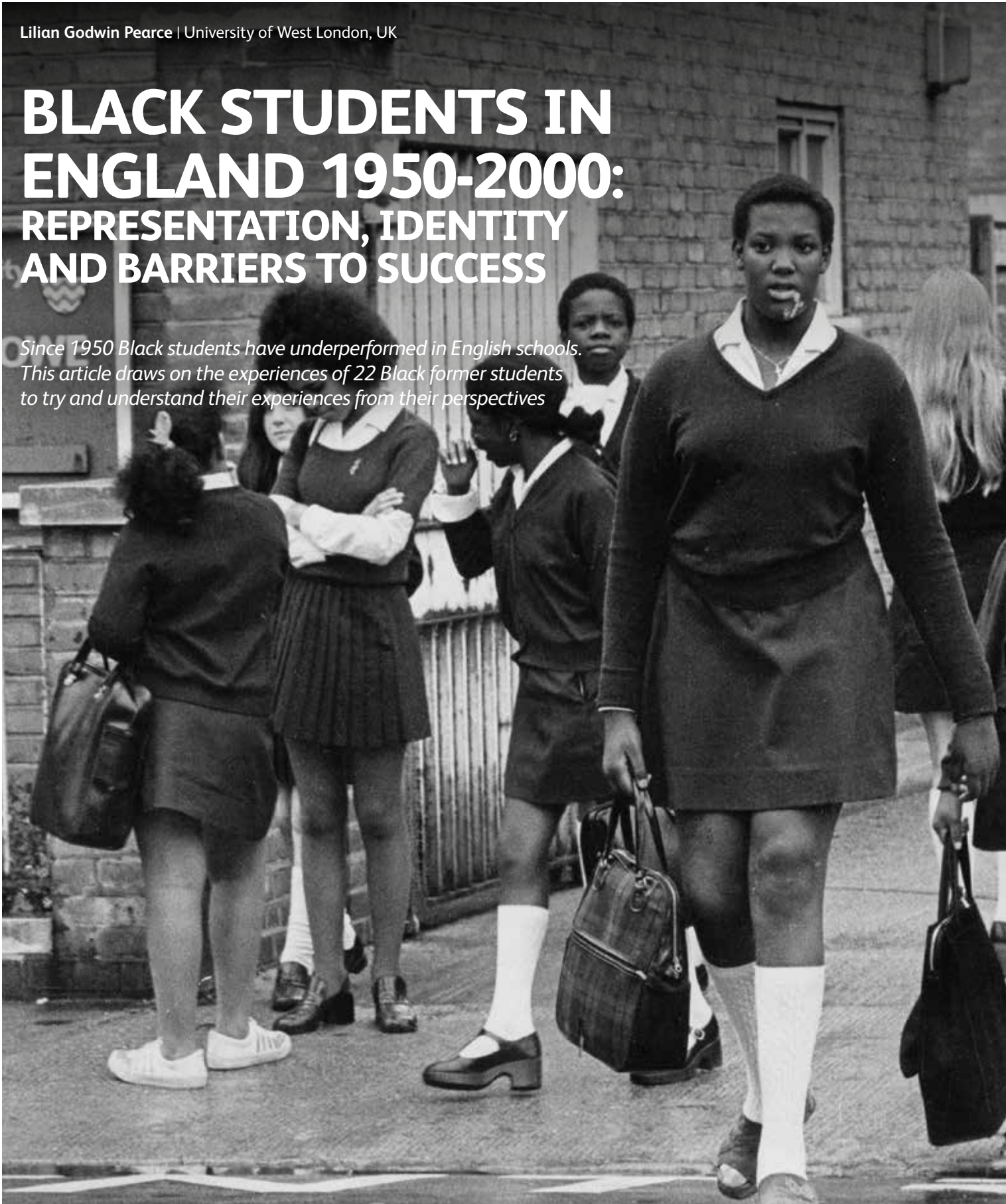**Lilian Godwin Pearce** | University of West London, UK

BLACK STUDENTS IN ENGLAND 1950-2000:
REPRESENTATION, IDENTITY AND BARRIERS TO SUCCESS

Since 1950 Black students have underperformed in English schools. This article draws on the experiences of 22 Black former students to try and understand their experiences from their perspectives

Between 1948 and 1971, a large number of people from the Caribbean were invited to live and work in England. Similar to the Black immigrants from other regions that had come before them, Black Caribbean parents expected their children to have a more enhanced education which would automatically be followed by opportunities and a prosperous future. Unfortunately, Black students did not share the experiences and outcomes attained by the most successful students in schools in England (HMI, 2002). Many first generation Black immigrants feel that they failed at school – leaving them determined that the cycle would not repeat itself with their children and grandchildren (HMI 2002); however the data is not positive and Black students have continued to perform below national average expected levels (Demie and McLean, 2017).

Several studies have investigated the academic performance of Black students in England mainly focusing on socio-economic factors; social class; the Black family structure and community, and parents' education and working backgrounds. Whilst numerous recommendations have been made, the attainment gap has continued to widen. In an attempt to understand some of the personal stories that lie behind this situation, this article reports on a study aimed at investigating the impact of the curriculum and pedagogy on the academic performance of Black students in England between 1950 and 2000.

Methodology

The data for this study was gathered from semi-structured interviews and a review of existing literature. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 Black former students who were educated between the 1950 and 2000. Interviews lasting around 45 minutes were conducted – five were face-to-face and 17 were over the telephone. The data from the interviews was coded carefully; reading each narrative to find connecting themes. Each participant's experiences were analysed individually and then across all participant narratives to find commonalities. By doing this I was not comparing the participants to one another but rather looking at their experiences as one complete story (Demac, Drew & Grimsley, 2010). Inevitably, the full richness of the data cannot be reported in the limited space of this article; therefore, I have chosen the most salient results.

Representation

The participants reported that, during their schooling, Black literature seemed to be absent from the curriculum; the majority of books used in lessons or recommended for reading by teachers were by white authors and often did not possess any positive illustrations of Black people. The participants sometimes failed to connect with these materials and lost interest in literacy in general. Literacy is often seen as the key to all the other subjects in the curriculum and the lack of vital literacy skills can hold a person back at every stage of their life. Therefore, if individuals are disenfranchised they may not be able to succeed at school; as a young adult they may be locked out of the job market, and as a parent they may not be able to support their own child's learning. This intergenerational cycle makes social mobility and a fairer society more difficult (National Literacy Trust 2019).

"As an Afro-Caribbean, my history was totally absent from the curriculum both at primary and secondary school, there was no positive black representation in anything I was taught."

Douglas

The lack of Black literature denies Black students the heroic representatives and principles that are associated with a sense of self-pride, they are also denied a beauty of one's self – causing them to grow up with a distorted self-image and finally, they feel worthless as they associate the lack of Black literature with only white people having done any thinking, feeling and achieving that is worth setting down. This situation not only creates self-hatred but also reinforces a race-based divide. Black literature included in lessons could help Black students connect literature to their day-to-day lives and enhance their engagement with the reading process; as they might feel that school and teachers respect and value them, and that education is for them too. For white students, the inclusion of Black literature would also be beneficial as it would help them become aware that there are other perspectives and ways to do things; they might build an understanding and respect for other cultures and be given a chance to examine race and racism.

Identity

When discussing how they were perceived, many Black former students felt that teachers judged their academic potential based on their home address; whether they were from a single parent family; their parents' employment history and educational background, and, shockingly, even the colour of their skin. One participant, Delilah, remembers wanting to apply for a secondary school place at a very popular local school but being discouraged by the teacher. Had it not been for the persistence of her parents (who applied anyway) she would not have attended this

school. In comparison Dylan missed out on an opportunity to apply to a grammar school because the headteacher had discouraged his parents saying that the student would not fit in. In this case the parents followed the advice they were given as they believed the head was looking out for their child's interests. Some positive data did emerge as the results demonstrated a positive teacher-student relationship and level of respect in younger teachers and Black teachers – but this was not the majority experience.

The majority of participants, whose education covers a fifty year period from 1950-2000, did not recall being taught African history and even for the millennials who were taught about the Transatlantic slave trade this was not a positive experience because the enslaved people, who were Black just like them, were depicted as second class. This was greatly embarrassing and caused these students to suffer from low self-esteem. Interestingly, one participant, Dylan, got the opportunity to study African history after he was expelled from school at fifteen. This gave him the opportunity to learn more about his heritage.

"I was learning African history well until I was seventeen, my take on Africa was different from all those other boys in school, when white teachers talked their foolishness for example that Egyptians were white, I would challenge them, this is one of the reasons I got expelled. I did not have the maturity to deal with them so I got confrontational."

Barriers

Black former students reported being faced with barriers to achievement in English schools. This took the shape of streaming, setting and assessment. Institutional racism was also exhibited in different ways. The majority of teachers were white and Black students were more likely to be labelled a 'problem' and automatically placed in a bottom set. What is more, racism was displayed in the language and comments that teachers indirectly used when referring to Black people or even, sometimes, how a teacher called out the same name of a Black student in class at any sense of trouble.

Participants in this study reported that there were suggestions that some teachers were prejudiced towards Black students. In a case where a Black and white student were involved in a fight, the teacher blamed and punished the Black student without investigating further but when a white student was reported as the perpetrator, the Black student was accused of telling lies. Some white teachers 'picked on' or did not seem to like Black students; they discouraged Black students from pursuing their future ambitions, and did not support their academic aspirations. Danielle remembers telling a science teacher that she wanted to pursue a career in medicine but was quickly 'shut down' and told, "You are not good enough." This comment made Danielle even more determined to prove them wrong.

Ultimately, underachievement is the logical outcome of racism and stereotyping in education. This may result into a student having negative perceptions and disengaging from school altogether. What is more, the fairly new phenomenon 'at-risk' seems to have become another way to blame Black students for both systematic neglect and the failure of schools to provide a decent education
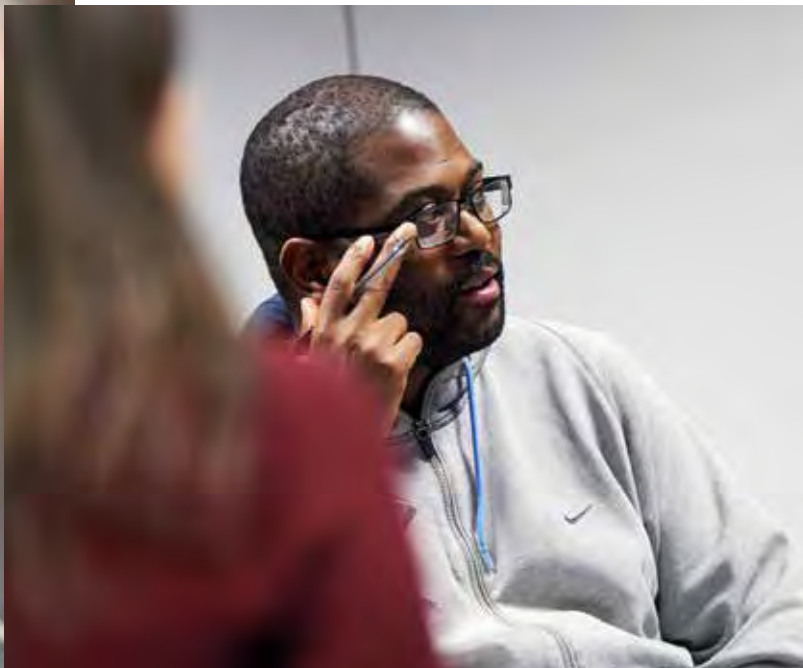
When exploring issues around stereotypes, Danielle, a fluent English speaker, recalls arriving in England and being automatically assigned to the English as an Additional Language group (EAL). The group constituted of majority Black students some of whom did not speak English – unlike Danielle, who was good at comprehension. The lessons were not challenging enough; students were frustrated, and the group was full of students with behavioural problems. There was a clear lack of appropriate support for students which resulted into hindrance to pupil progress and poor performance.

Discussion

This study covered the experiences of Black students in English schools from 1950-2000. The results were shocking but sadly not unexpected. The results here indicate that the curriculum was not representative of Black students. Black history was absent and the Transatlantic slave trade focused on Britain's role as the abolitionists. Black literature was absent and none of the books used in the lessons even contained illustrations of Black people. In the majority of cases, Black students felt that teachers' inaccurate beliefs and prejudice misallocated them to low attainment groups and set low expectations. Almost all of the interviewees pointed to a teacher's pedagogical approach as the factor that most impacted their academic performance.

Prior studies have noted the importance of teachers having equally high expectations for all students including equal opportunities; equal access to the curriculum, and a commitment to ensure that all students are progressing (HMI 2002). How a teacher perceives a student can act like an obstacle to achievement or it can be springboard to success.

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Many Black people, who attended school in the years 1950-2000, feel that they failed at school (HMI 2002) – the data here suggests that it may well have been schools who failed them! There are still major issues with the overall academic outcomes of Black and minority ethnic students in England and without honest reflection the cycle may continue (Milner, 2005). It is important that schools have a clear stand on racism with unambiguous policies and a commitment to equal opportunities at all levels within the school system. What is more, schools could consider broadening and enriching the curriculum. Schools could have trips to museums that feature African work and collections. African and Caribbean history and Black literature including but not limited to 'The Greedy Man and the Stranger' (Senegal), 'External Love' (Ivory Coast), 'Origin of Mankind' (Togoland), 'The Black Jacobins' (Haiti), 'Capitalism and Slavery' (Trinidad and Tobago) could be included in the curriculum as a topic in itself rather than a side-note in reference to the slave trade. The curriculum that participants in this study experienced did not include political, historical and social experiences of various ethnic groups. Addressing these areas could help Black students understand themselves and others in a pluralistic society and help eliminate stereotypes and racism.

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