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Young black males: resilience and the use of capital to transform school ‘failure’

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This article addresses the idea of ‘failure’ of young black males with respect to schooling. Perceptions of black masculinity are often linked to ‘underperformance’ in the context of school academic achievement. This article addresses how young black men, by great personal effort, recover from school ‘failure’. It explores how young black men, despite negative school experiences, see possibilities for their future and how they seek to transform school ‘failure’ into personal and educational ‘success’. Low attainment combined with permanent/temporary exclusion from school does not necessarily deter young black men from pursuing their education. This low attainment is used by some to make a renewed attempt at educational progression in a different post-school learning environment. Yosso’s concept of ‘community cultural wealth’ provides an understanding of how different forms of capital are accessed by young black men to form a ‘turnaround narrative’. This article considers the complex ways in which young black males work to transform their negative school experience. Their narratives reveal a determination to succeed and the ways in which cultivation of this determination by the family, organisational/community agents promotes a sense of possibility. However, it remains to be seen how, in the UK, the cuts to vital local services and support will impact on this sense of possibility.

Keywords: aspirational capital; education; familial capital; identity; navigational capital; resilience; resistant; social capital; success; young black males

Introduction

The portrait of black masculinity that emerges in this work perpetually constructs black men as ‘failures’ …. Yet, there has never been a time in the history of the United States when black folks, particularly black men, have not been enraged by the dominant culture’s stereotypical, fantastical representations of black masculinity …. (Hooks, 1992, p. 89)

Hooks’ comment exemplifies the dominant negative stereotypical narrative of black men in the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US) societies. It portrays the presence of black males as problematic to the extent that black males are considered to have ‘failed’.

Indeed, it is widely recognised that part of the wider perception of black masculinity is the notion of ‘failure’. This is evident particularly within the context of education and with regard to black boys in the UK and the US in relation to them being labelled as ‘under-performing’. This has, in turn, been reflected in US and UK statistics relating to black
male academic achievement (e.g. DfE (Department for Education), 2013; Farkas, 2003; REACH, 2007; Strand, 2010) and black male unemployment. For example, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2012) reported that in 2011, 55.9% of black males aged 16–24 in the UK were unemployed which is more than double the proportion of white males (23.9%) in the same age group (see also Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), 2010). Moreover, it is suggested that a discourse of ‘failing black masculinity’ (Reynolds, 2006; Sewell, 1997), especially in its overrepresentation of black males in the criminal justice system (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 2007) has been important in influencing how educational statistics on academic achievement are explained by the media and the government (Gillborn, 2008; Mocombe, Tomlin, & Wright, 2014).

This article examines the experiences of young black men excluded from school and how they negotiate their futures. This is particularly with respect to transforming school ‘failure’ into ‘success’. The article commences with a review of the literature with regard to educational ‘failure’, exclusion and potential success. This is followed by an examination of intersectionality, forms of capital and their utilisation to achieve success. There then follows the findings of the authors’ study into how young black men excluded from school engaged in a ‘turnaround narrative’ to transform their negative school experience.

**Literature review: education and the othering of black students**

As mentioned previously both within the US and the UK the presence of young black people within the respective education systems has been framed within a discourse of ‘problematic students’ because of their perceived alien demands and identities (King, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Majors, 2001; Wright, Standen, & Patel, 2010). Within both contexts young black men are seen as the most problematic group (Goff, Jackson, Di Leone, Culotta, & DiTomasso, 2014; Gosai, 2009; Sewell, 1997). Yet schooling, underpinned by the ‘permanence of structural racism’ (Dumas, 2014, p. 20), ‘is a site of suffering’ (Dumas, 2014, p. 2) for black students as a whole (Leonardo, 2009). Within the UK, young people of African-Caribbean heritage, particularly young black men, feature disproportionately in terms of low educational achievement and high rates of exclusion from school (DfE, 2013; Graham & Robinson, 2004; Richardson, 2005). This is compared to Chinese and Indian heritage children who are consistently denoted as high achievers in terms of 5A*-C GCSE (general certificate in secondary education) passes (including English and mathematics), followed by white British, Bangladeshi and Pakistani heritage children (DfE 2013; Strand 2014). At an individual level, attaining 5A*-C at GCSE is the measure which is used by the UK government (through the Department for Education (DfE)) to judge student success. At the school level, individual and cross school comparisons of success are determined by a floor level target of 40% of pupils at a school attaining five GCSE grades between A* and C, including passes in English and maths (Adams, 2015; the DfE 2015). As well as these defined and measurable criteria of schooling success, Tett (2014) suggests that students’ notions of success and failure are informed by their experiences of teaching and learning. She found that adults who had been positioned ‘failures’ at school had ‘learners identities’ that had been ‘constituted by the dominant discourses of education where people are divided into high or low achievers, intelligent or ignorant, capable or incapable’.

While such labels are experienced by all students in English schools it could be argued that contentions of being ‘capable’ are undermined by national GCSE results which positions African-Caribbean males in comparison to students from other ethnic groups as not just underachievers, but as failures, likely to fail (even if supported) and therefore
not worth bothering about because of the persistent underachievement of the African-Caribbean group as a whole. If unchallenged these notions of ‘failure’ become internalised and negative learner identities can be difficult to escape (Youdell, 2003). A further problem is that rather than being regarded as individuals, stereotyped notions of black failure held by teachers can serve to limit a student’s ambitions because they are constantly told their goals are impossible to achieve (Maylor, 2014).

The considerable variation in educational achievement for young black men is also linked to high exclusion rates (Blair, 2001; Christian, 2005; DfES, 2006). Exclusion from school, particularly black student exclusion, is an extremely urgent issue (Office of the Children’s Commissioner, 2012), especially as Britain’s official exclusion figures for black students far outstrip those of other countries in Europe and North America (Mocombe et al., 2014). However, even in the US, school exclusion and suspension figures indicate that significantly high numbers of black students, particularly males, are being suspended and/or excluded, often for relatively minor incidents and at a much higher rate than their white counterparts (see, e.g., Gardner, Ford, & Miranda, 2001; Gregory & Thompson, 2010; NAEP, 2008; Skiba, Trachok, Chung, Baker, & Hughes, 2012).

A related topic of discussion and debate are the negative consequences related to school suspension/exclusion, namely, school disengagement, school dropout, poor retention and ultimately school failure (Eitle and Elite, 2004). This racial–ethnic and gendered disparity in exclusionary practices has also become an integral part of the debate and discussion relating to closing the black/white achievement gap in both the UK (e.g. Gillborn, 2008; Strand, 2010, 2014) and the US (e.g. National Assessment Education Progress (NCES), 2009; US Department of Education 2014). In 2014, US government concern about the high school suspension rates and the relatively poor educational and employment outcomes of young black males when compared to white students underscored the launching of a national government initiative – ‘My Brother’s Keeper’. This was designed to close the educational and employment gap by fostering educational and employment opportunities for boys and young black men, as explained by the US President Barack Obama who said:

As a black student, you are far less likely than a white student to be able to read proficiently by the time you are in 4th grade. By the time you reach high school, you’re far more likely to have been suspended or expelled. . . . Black kids are nearly four times as likely [as white kids] to be suspended. And if a student has been suspended even once by the time they’re in 9th grade they are twice as likely to drop out. . . . we know young black men are twice as likely as young white men to be ‘disconnected’ – not in school, not working. . . . Fewer young black and Latino men participate in the labor force compared to young white men. And all of this translates into higher unemployment rates and poverty rates as adults. (Obama, 2014, online)

Obama’s comment concerning the educational outcomes of ‘Black kids’ resonates strongly with the situation in the UK, but a number of writers go beyond this, for instance, the works of Channer (1995), Rhamie (2007), Byfield (2008) and Wright et al. (2010), by offering evidence of young black people’s successful personal and educational outcomes of post-compulsory education. Moreover, this article posits, as Rhamie (2007) points out, that it is important to explore all aspects of black students’ experiences within the education system, not only the pattern of differentiated attainment, ‘but also the factors that fracture that pattern and enable academic success’ (p. 4). Indeed with respect to the pervasive discourses of ‘failing’ young black people, particularly males, a number of researchers have been critical of what is considered to be the normalised ‘absence and the
pathologised presences of the non-western subjects in the academy’ (Phoenix, 1998, p. 860). This is despite the fact that, according to Owen (2006), within the UK there is an overrepresentation of young black people in higher education compared to their presence in the population.

Low attainment at 16 is not the disaster which is often portrayed to be, as it can be regarded by certain groups of young black people as a platform for making a fresh start in a new learning environment on a journey to improve longer-term career prospects. An understanding of how low GCSE attainment can lead to renewed self-belief in a non-mainstream school environment is needed to gain a sense of educational progression of young black people. One route for this is further education, as further education colleges offer opportunities and courses for black young people who have been alienated by their experience of school (DfES, 2003). Indeed it is evident that African-Caribbean males are more likely to continue their studies in further education than white males (Strand, 2012). Data also suggest that the proportion of UK domiciled black students pursuing higher education degree courses has increased since the academic year 2003/04 (ECU, 2014).

The desire for further and higher education study highlights the commitment of young black people to challenge conceptions of black ‘failure’.

Similarly, findings from the US also suggest that black students at the post-secondary education stage ‘obtain more from [college] education than their white counterparts after statistically controlling for socioeconomic status (SES) and academic characteristics (e.g. proficiency grades)’ (Merolla, 2013, pp. 895–896). Merolla (2013) contends that this level of college participation provides black students with a ‘net black advantage’ and it is an advantage that ‘exists across college types and may be stronger for students at lower levels of the SES gradient’ (pp. 895–896). The ‘net black advantage’ Merolla identified is based on a statistical analysis of 5247 white and 701 black students as part of a longitudinal study from 1988 to 2000 undertaken by the US National Center for Educational Statistics. In the study, 30% of the black students’ parents had a college degree compared with 37% of white students, and 31% of black students were from low income families compared with 12% of white students. As well as higher college entrance, Tienda (2013) further argues, ‘on graduating from college black [students] are more likely than white students to enrol in graduate school, and that they do so at a faster rate’ (p. 470; emphasis in original).

Theoretical framework: intersectionality and forms of capital

This section explores the theory of intersectionality alongside a discussion of the notion of ‘capital’ seen through the prism of critical race theory (CRT) (Yosso, 2005) in relation to the black communities’ political mobilisation around racial inequality in education (Wright, 2013).

In essence, intersectional analysis was created by black feminists as an attempt to counter work by white feminists to ‘homogenise women’s situations’ (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Nira Yuval-Davis (2011), reflecting on debates about intersectionality, acknowledges the history of the approach, as exemplified in the work of black women writers. ‘Intersectionality’ is a term coined by Kimberley Crenshaw (1989). Brah and Phoenix (2004) argue that intersectionality offers a framework whereby race, ethnicity, social class and other social divisions can be theorised as lived realities. Thus, intersectionality signals a departure from the additive multiple models of double or triple jeopardy and the seemingly meaningless list of never-ending hierarchies of multiple positions and identities (Butler, 1990; McCall, 2005). The notion of ‘embodied intersectionality’ is applied in this
article to make sense of what the black males’ experiences tells us about the construction of racialised, classed and gendered subjectivity(ties) and identities within the context of education and personal outcomes. Essentially, it provides an understanding of the ways in which markers of social difference, such as race, class, gender, age and so on intersect to create diverse experiences.

Within youth transitions research, it is recognised that as a concept ‘social capital’ offers a useful analytical framework for capturing how young people negotiate ways out of social disadvantage. As such the arguments presented are located in an understanding, informed by the extension of Bourdieu’s (1986) work on social and cultural capital by Yosso (2005). Yosso (2005) takes a CRT perspective in advancing Bourdieu’s ideas. The writer attempts to extend the various forms of capital to theoretically reposition or centre the experiences of black people in the discourse of what constitutes social capital. In this regard, the writer ‘calls into question white middle class communities as the standard by which all others are judged’ (p. 82).

Yosso details the concept of CRT, which is called Community cultural wealth. ‘Yosso (2005) describes CRT as a framework that can be used to theorize, examine, and change the ways race and racism affect social structures, practices, and discourses’ (Schlesinger, 2013, p. 1). Using CRT, Yosso (2005) envisages social and cultural capital as Community cultural wealth which she conceptualised as an array of ‘knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression’ (p. 69). The writer articulates six overlapping forms of capital that comprise community resources: aspirational, navigational, social, resistant, familial and linguistic capital. A brief description of Yosso’s forms of capital is presented here: Aspirational capital is to have the desire to be highly ambitious when there are considerable barriers making this almost impossible. Navigational capital is having the skills to see through complex social institutions that systemically disadvantage minorities. Social capital refers to people who can be turned to in order to obtain support. Resistant capital is the ability to not accept negative stereotyping and to assert one’s own identity. Familial capital refers to family support. Linguistic capital is the set of communications skills, such as bilingual skills to communicate with a variety of communities.

This article applies an intersectional stratification alongside Yosso’s (2005) overlapping forms of capital to a study which analyses the multifaceted, nuanced and complex ways in which postcolonial diasporic young black males resist and work to transform their negative school experience. Essentially, looking at the forms of capital used by black males not only allows us to recognise the system and processes that create school ‘failure’ but also accounts for the agented strategies they use to create pathways to personal and educational success.

The study: black male exclusion from school
This study focuses on black males excluded from school. It documents their post-compulsory school experiences and how they achieved successful personal and educational outcomes.

With respect to the use of the term ‘black’ to describe the participants of the study, it is noteworthy, that in the UK, the term ‘Black has a complex history’ (see Warmington, 2014 for debates in this area). ‘It can, depending on context, denote either people of African/African-Caribbean descent or, via discourse of “political blackness”, the wider assembly of African, African-Caribbean, Asian, Arabic and mixed race peoples constructed in the post-war period of immigration – something akin to the collective referred to in the USA as people of colour’ (Warmington, 2014, p. 5). In the article, the term is
used to refer to people of African/African-Caribbean descent. The black population in the UK is 5.5% (3.1 million) of the total UK population.

The data were collected as part of a larger project of 33 male and female participants combining quantitative data with qualitative interviewing. Although the study includes male and female participants the concentration here is on male participants. The male participants were considered to exhibit the forms of the capital described previously, such as aspirational, resistant, familial, social and navigational capital.

The data upon which the article is based include 100 narrative interviews conducted with 21 black males between the ages of 14 and 19 all of whom were of African-Caribbean heritage who had experienced permanent school exclusion. The young people were drawn from residents in Nottingham and London. Both cities are known for a disproportionately high level of school exclusions (see Eggleston, Dunn, Anjali, & Wright, 1986; Mirza & Reay, 2000; Mocombe et al., 2014; Wright, Weekes, & Macglauglin, 2000; Wright et al., 2010; Wright, 2015) in the UK, including those who had been excluded from both state and independent schools. The young people were interviewed on a maximum of three occasions over a period of two years. Participants were asked to talk about various aspects of three themes: their view of self, following exclusion, sources of support and coping strategies for transforming school exclusion and their views on current personal circumstances and ambitions/aspiration for the future. Additional data were provided from over 60 interviews with contacts nominated by the young people, including community and social workers, mothers, fathers, grandparents, siblings and friends. Traditionally, these black males are often described as hard to reach (Merton, 1998). Thus, a snowballing sample method was used to access the black males for the study. These included contacts with black community groups, black organisations, supplementary schools and black churches. Meetings with the young men were conducted in a variety of locations including their homes, university and community venues.

Integral to the research design was the desire to both engage and empower the men. In this vein, the use of visual methods was valuable in the following respects. First, we anticipated that traditional one-to-one interviewing would not necessarily be the best way to carry out the research with the excluded men because they were likely to have experienced many interview situations where the aim was to prove their responsibility for the exclusion. After considering other methods, visual research methods, namely participant photography, was chosen to place the men at the centre of the research process. Thus, the empowerment of the research participants was at the core of the research design (see Wright, 2015).

The findings: how black males in school use different forms of capital

The findings in this article illustrate how the black males traverse and transcend the educational terrain to create successful personal and educational outcomes ‘by drawing [on] their community cultural wealth and different forms of capital’ (Oropenza, Varghese, & Kanno, 2010, p. 22)

Aspirational and resistant capital: ‘turnaround narrative’

Notably, for Yosso (2005) aspirational capital is to have the desire to be highly ambitious, even in the face of considerable barriers. The desire to achieve educational success, carving out a career path and social mobility was a common theme emanating from the black males narratives.

For the black men, a major source of aspirational capital came from the desire to transform their ‘failing’ identity through a process of recovery and redemption or what
Harding (2010) refers to as the ‘turnaround narrative’. Harding in his study of adolescent boys living in black neighbourhoods in the US context, explains the narrative of ‘recovery and redemption’ as denoting someone of humble origins who achieves success through hard work and ingenuity. This is considered to be a widespread American idea. It involves recovery from a setback or personal failure. Key elements of the ‘turnaround narrative’ include recognising previous ‘errors’ for example, addiction, street crime, juvenile detention (see Toldson, 2011), getting away from people or places that contribute to past problems. Similarly, Merolla (2013) found black parents’ high aspirations combined with ‘black students high expectations act as a critical buffer against the reproduction of racial inequalities in educational attainment’ (p. 919) and create the conditions for future possibilities. The young men became engaged in pursuing the ‘turnaround narrative’. The desire for change, overcoming adversity and possibilities for personal and educational success are highlighted in the remarks below by Leon, Roger and Dale:

I want a decent job . . . and anything that pays . . . then look for an office job when I get a bit older and wear [a] suit and tie and everything . . . it’s not like I’m dumb . . . I’ve got plans. I got ideas for the future. (Leon)

My mum and dad just said, when I was excluded they just said . . . the main thing . . . was to turn the negative into positive in the long run by what I did, what I achieved, my exam results, which basically [is] like spitting in the head teacher’s face. (Roger)

I need to go back to college, go to school and don’t get kicked out. It’s not good in the long run . . . it’s hard to find a decent job without qualifications. (Dale)

The young men are implying that aspirational capital can incorporate resistant capital. For instance, Leon, Roger and Dale talked explicitly about the need to resist and re-negotiate the school ‘failure’ identity label ascribed to them through the school exclusion process. By re-engaging with education and the subsequent acquisition of educational qualifications, Roger felt able not only to celebrate his educational success but also to dismiss the label ascribed to him by his previous school and the head teacher.

Similarly, for Dale resistance was in the form of his aspiration to go to college for the purpose of acquiring qualifications which would assist in establishing a career pathway. Also, reflected in the men’s conversations about the use of resistance and aspiration in negotiating the school ‘failure’ label is the application of the ‘turnaround narrative’ connected to resilience and a ‘culture of possibility’ (Yosso, 2005, p. 78) as a way of responding to personal struggles.

**Family capital: the role of family and parenting in achieving success**

Consistent with the literature on the role of family in achieving educational and personal success (Fordham, 1986; Merolla, 2013; Reynolds, 2006; Rollock, Gillborn, Vincent, & Ball, 2011) the black males talked about how their high expectations, inspiration, emotional support and cultural resilience related to the aspirational capital developed through their family, shaped their educational and personal careers.

The cases of Tony and David illustrate how strong bonds within their families in turn helped gain other kinds of capital, such as aspirational and resistant capital. These were essential to their pathways to educational and personal success:

they (family) kept me up and encouraged me a lot . . . they were always there for me and from the beginning they believed in me. (Tony)
David also recalled how his father ‘because he cared and wanted to help me out of the situation’ had sought legal advice after he was excluded from his mainstream school.

Many of the young men reported that the negative educational experiences and the endeavour to forge success and the family emotional support later offered, had led to an improvement in familial relationships. As Nelson expressed:

she (mother) believed in me. I think it might have brought us closer together closer because she actually believed me and trusted me . . . showed me how to cope . . . I was happy that she believed me. I was glad that she was there to support me. (Nelson)

Thus, strong bonds with their families, in turn, helped these black males gain other kinds of capital, such as aspirational and resistant capital which were critical to ensuring educational and personal success. In particular, and consistent with the literature, the family and the role of ‘mothers’ were considered pivotal to how black males traverse and transcend the educational terrain to ensure a positive outcome. Indeed, Reay (2000) in her study posits that mothers’ emotional support of their children’s academic success transfers to educational and social prestige (see also Mirza, 2009).

Social and navigational capital: community, ‘diasporic collectives’ and social actions

Cultural action is always a systematic and deliberate form of action which operates upon the social structure, either with the objective of preserving that structure or of transforming it. As a form of deliberate and systematic action, all cultural action has its theory which determines its ends and thereby defines its methods.(Freire, 1972, p. 46)

This quotation from Freire encapsulates the way in which the black diasporic community strives to transform conditions in their communities’ and the role of social capital in that transformation (see also Reynolds, 2013).

Several forms of capital used by participants to help them achieve successful personal and educational outcomes. Peter and James talked about using localised community programmes such as those offered by black community organisations, black churches and black supplementary schools (Andrews, 2013; Maylor et al., 2013; Mirza & Reay, 2000). The nature of the navigational capital afforded the black males included advice, mentoring, inspiration, information about accessing education and training opportunities which enabled them to convert their social capital directly into navigational capital. For example:

the ISSP, they giving me help as well . . . they like keeping [me] off the streets like . . . more constructive things to do, like more positive things in my mind. (Peter)

Similarly, as James states:

It made me do a lot of thinking for myself, it made me self-conscious and not so arrogant . . . because there are two paths for me, the situation that I was in . . . I had to decide which one I had to take, and I took a lot of stick but was given a lot of advice, suggestions. (James)

Both participants’ comments illustrate how they sought to re-negotiate their identity as school ‘failures’ and how this strongly related to aspirational and resistant capital alongside the ‘turnaround narrative’ developed through their family. Moreover, in addition to the confirmation of the significance of the organisational agents in conferring navigational
capital on the participants, they simultaneously mentioned the saliency of the ethos, context and atmosphere in which the resources were delivered. Thus, despite finding engaging with the resources personally challenging as James stated it ‘made me self-conscious and not so arrogant . . . took a lot of stick’, the participants felt a strong sense of connection to the organisations they utilised.

Further, agents from the organisations utilised by the black men, underlined the participants’ strong sense of belonging and the connections to navigational capital afforded them. For instance, staff members discussed the local black community services offered specifically for the purpose of supporting black males excluded from school. The focus of these services would appear to be two-fold. Firstly, navigational capital in the form of practical and emotional support such as advice, career advice, tutoring services, self-affirming classes, access to educational opportunities which were critical to black males pathway to educational and personal success. Secondly, engaging in political activism concerning obstacles to black young people accessing educational opportunities. Indeed, these organisational activities resonated with both Freire’s (1972) notion of ‘cultural action’ mentioned previously and Yosso’s (2005) concept of ‘community cultural wealth’.

I just have a team that is trying to support the young people for what they have been through and supposed to get and have been denied of, and try to do the best we can do within the parameters and move the boundaries and knock the door hard and move the doors off the hinges to make changes. (Youth advocate manager, ISSP, London)

Any gaps in society, [we] try and help plug those. (Community development officer, Nottingham)

In essence, these organisations’ engagement with the participants, which included activities such as fostering a pro-active approach to accessing educational opportunities, strategies/tactics for social mobility, encouraging constructive racial and cultural identity and a focus on achieving success through personal transformation, in turn, helped the black males gain other capital, such as aspirational and resistant capital.

Conclusion

This article examined how black males excluded from school employ agentic strategies to create successful personal and educational outcomes. It illuminates the fact that hitherto focus on researching and theorising the problematic experience of education entirely has diverted attention from the creative and dynamic ways black males negotiate barriers and uncertainties endemic in what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2009) term the era of ‘globalised modernity’. In this regard, the article thus offers a counter-narrative to the discourse relating to black males in the UK.

The article raised the issue of how individuals overcome negative mainstream school experiences and ‘succeed’. The dominant notion of ‘success’ refers to the gaining of educational qualifications and/or ‘success’ in the job market. It illustrates how black males achieve these, by drawing on different forms of capital they possess. In this regard, the black males incorporated aspirational and resistant capital connected through familial capital. This allowed them to reject the school ‘failure’ label and pursue further and/or higher education. Additionally, they developed and acquired social and navigational capital through institutional agents, by negotiating the ‘failure’ label that they were given in school. This helped them re-enter education and later gain employment. Notwithstanding, the increase in youth unemployment in the UK in recent years has
resulted in unemployment for many, including black students, who have succeeded in the education system (IPPR, 2010). This has meant that for many black students passing their GCSE examinations does not always translate into positive long term employment outcomes.

Clearly, some black males overcome negative school experiences and they are able to participate in education outside of the mainstream sector. However, we must not focus solely on each individual’s attributes, but also focus on what it is that will increase the likelihood of black males as a group being successful. Black male group success warrants further attention with respect to employment possibilities.

Workforce statistics (IPPR, 2010) suggest that not everyone from marginalised groups can necessarily succeed in the labour market. Moreover, the educational system and labour market are structured so that black educational and employment success is not possible (ONS, 2012), and it might be argued that wholesale educational success and employment is unachievable as the labour market needs to have a pool of unemployed labour. Hence, the pathways to social mobility are only possible for limited numbers (Compton, 2008). Can we therefore assume that one million young people currently unemployed in the UK are surplus to requirements?

The change in the UK economy and the reduction in public spending (HM Government, 2010) have had a disproportionate impact on those groups most at risk from exclusion and most at risk of ‘failure’ educational or otherwise. Following on from this, it can be argued that the propensity for black people to be considered ‘failures’ has been further exacerbated by the recent Conservative government budget cuts and changes to tax credits and other welfare benefits, which according to a report by the Runnymede Trust (2015), have disproportionately affected black and minority ethnic households as they are more likely to be unemployed, earn less than the minimum wage and have higher poverty rates than white British households. Racial inequality in employment for black people (IPPR, 2010) raises the question as to whether the aspirational and resistance capital infused with ‘turnaround narrative’ expressed by the young black men here will persist. Will these young black men’s aspirations and ambitions be undermined in an era of decreasing employment opportunities? Will the desire to resist and navigate school disadvantage to achieve successful personal and educational outcomes continue? Therefore, perhaps the notion of success could go beyond qualifications and access to the job market but also include developing resilience, self-esteem and resourcefulness. The access of black males to the different forms of capital highlighted in this article becomes ever more vital in an era of increasing uncertainty for post education futures.

Notes

1. Within the British education system the most serious sanction that a school can take against a student is to exclude them permanently. This is where a school decides to remove a student from the school role. The local education authority has the duty to ensure that such students receive a basic education elsewhere. However, permanent exclusion is only one form of school exclusion. Most school exclusion is of a fixed term with students readmitted after a period of time.
2. The findings are drawn from a study funded by Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Overcoming school exclusion and achieving successful youth transitions within African-Caribbean Communities, 2003–2005.
3. The form of ‘capital’ referred to as ‘Linguistic capital’ is not relevant in this study because English is the first language of all participants.
4. All the names of people are pseudonyms.
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