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Achievement and underachievement: the experiences of African Caribbeans

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The disproportionate representation of African Caribbeans in all the negative educational statistics has been well documented. Despite this, there are African Caribbeans who achieve academically but relatively few studies have explored this area. This study aimed to investigate the factors that contribute to African Caribbean academic success, taking into account the factors that contribute to low academic achievement. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Seventy-eight questionnaires were analysed and 38 respondents aged 16 to 40+ years were interviewed. Data is presented for the highest and lowest achieving groups. The findings revealed that most African Caribbeans have negative experiences at school. The difference between those who are successful academically and those who are not depends upon the development of resilience and protective factors that mitigate the negative impact of school. The study suggests that schools, communities and parents need to work much closer together to reduce negative school experiences to ensure the success of African Caribbean pupils.

Keywords: African Caribbean achievement; resilience; academic success

The underachievement of African Caribbean children has been the focus of much attention over the past decades. The depth and nature of the problem is highlighted through the over-representation of African Caribbean children in the figures for school exclusion, poor exam results, having emotional and behavioural difficulties, and receiving statements of Special Educational Need (Gillborn and Mirza 2000; Osler et al. 2001; Parsons et al. 2005 and Bhattacharyya, Ison, and Blair 2003).

While the levels of attainment amongst African Caribbeans have improved in recent years from 29.5% GCSE grades A*-C including English and Maths in 2006 to 39.4% in 2009 (DCSF 2010), African Caribbeans continue to feature amongst the lowest performing groups. The underachievement of White working class pupils has been highlighted as an area of concern as the ‘group
with the lowest examination attainment at age 16.’ This is true for both boys and girls (Strand 2008, 4). When data are examined and mediating factors such as gender and socio-economic classification (SEC) of the home are controlled for, Black Caribbean boys, White working class boys and girls are the lowest performing groups. When examining the level of progress that has been made in attainment these groups made the least expected progress (Strand 2008). However, a closer examination of the data shows continued underachievement amongst African Caribbeans from high SEC homes where there are high parental aspirations and high academic self-concept. The attainment of these pupils is significantly lower than for White British pupils with similar characteristics (Strand 2008). What is clear in some respects is that despite having all the characteristics associated with academic success African Caribbean pupils continue to underachieve at school. It is important that in the rush to address the underachievement of White working class pupils, the attainment of African Caribbean pupils is not ignored. Gillborn (2008) suggests that media interpretation and representation of the underachievement of White working class boys leads to a perception of them as victims of racism, whilst at the same time masking Black underachievement through the focus on attainment gaps which appear to suggest gains in the progress of ethnic minority groups but fails to maintain a focus on the continual underachievement of these groups of pupils.

The focus on underachievement has led to some improvements over the years. However, with the continued failings of African Caribbean pupils in particular, a new approach is needed. Relatively few studies exploring African Caribbean academic success have been undertaken. Studies that have focussed on achievement in African Caribbean children have been largely ethnographic. Early research by Bagley, Bart, and Wong (1979) and Tomlinson (1983a), found a number of factors associated with above average achievement, including parents’ awareness of the limitations of the school system resulting in their willingness to challenge and question schools. Parents had better educational backgrounds and their children had positive attitudes to school and a positive self-image. The important role parental support plays in academic success has been stressed as a critical factor in a number of success studies; Osler (1997), Sewell (2000), Rhamie and Hallam (2002) and Byfield (2008). Channer’s (1995) study, additionally found that particular characteristics of church affiliation acted as a ‘buffer against racism’ for her successful respondents (190).

It would be simplistic to assume that the influence of parents or church affiliation alone is the key to success. Academic success is rarely due to a single factor. A combination of factors such as perseverance, the ability to negotiate obstacles, the need for acknowledgement, respect and the opportunity to succeed as well as parental support are described in MacDonald’s (2001) study as important in the success of Black British professionals. The range of factors that can contribute to academic success may vary
between individuals but the role of the family and the school are important. The cumulative effect of these factors appears to enable higher levels of achievement in school. The importance of a range of factors has been identified in other success research.

Rhamie and Hallam (2002) found that combinations of factors within the child, home, school and community were responsible for the high achievement of the respondents. Two possible models of success were proposed: a Home-School Model, which described a continuous positive interaction between the home and school where both fostered academic excellence and success and a Home-Community Model which proposed that the family and community together created a ‘sense of belonging’ and acceptance fostering achievement and success, which compensated for low expectations and resources in the school. This combination of factors contributed to success.

Other research has investigated school processes and their effect on academic attainment. Tomlin (2006) examined the factors and conditions that lead to high achievement amongst Black pupils. Through interviews and focus groups she found that strong leadership, high teacher expectations, good teacher–pupil relationships, positive partnerships with parents and a high level of parental involvement, in addition to creative approaches to the curriculum contributed to pupils’ above average attainment. Ofsted (2002) found that in schools where African Caribbeans do well the important characteristics were that the school had gained the confidence of parents and the community. The school’s ethos was one in which all pupils were valued and included and where high expectations were the norm. Pupil progress was also closely monitored through good use of data to track and identify pupils in need of additional support. Parents were kept informed and involved through being invited to contribute to decisions about support and receiving up to date information about their child’s progress (Ofsted 2002).

The research evidence suggests that the persistent underachievement of ethnic minority groups and African Caribbeans particularly implies that the strategies designed to provide equality of opportunity are failing. More detailed research needs to examine the nature of the success of African Caribbeans who defy the odds and succeed. This article presents the findings of research that attempts to explore the nature of this success. It does so through examining the experiences of African Caribbean learners who were successful or unsuccessful in school.

This study aimed to explore the educational experiences of African Caribbeans who attended school in the UK. It investigated the factors that contribute to high and low academic achievement. The factors that contribute to achievement throughout schooling are not solely related to education at school but also to a broader experience of education that takes place in a variety of contexts at home and within the community. This research focuses on the perceptions and interpretations of these experiences by the respondents themselves and their view of what contributed to their academic attainment.
The theoretical underpinnings of the research lie within an eco systemic framework influenced by grounded theory. This framework recognises that individuals interact within a range of ecosystems such as the home, school and the community. A phenomenological approach was adopted. This paradigm seeks to explore the way people experience their world (Tesch 1990) which allows for increased ‘theoretical flexibility’ (Spinelli 1989, 22).

Methodology
Following pilot work, a questionnaire and semi-structured interview schedule were developed which explored a range of issues relating to academic qualifications, current occupation, school experiences, home experiences, parental education and occupation, activities within the community, personal and other miscellaneous activities and experiences.

Four hundred and twenty three questionnaires were distributed to an opportunity sample in a range of settings including youth, community and employment centres, tertiary institutions and churches. Seventy eight questionnaires were returned and 32 indicated a willingness to be interviewed further. This article focuses on and presents the findings for the highest and lowest achieving groups only, referred to as the High Fliers and the Underachievers, respectively. Data presented in this article is from 43 questionnaires with 18 follow-up interviews. The results of the full study have been reported in Rhamie (2007). The respondents were aged 16–40+ years with 62% aged over 31 years. A further 70% (30) of the two groups returning questionnaires were female. However, of the interviewees in the highest achieving group 6/13 were female 7/13 were male. The lowest achieving group of 5 interviewees were mainly female (4/5). Further details of the sample are presented with the analysis.

The interviews were taped and transcribed for analysis. An information sheet was distributed to participants indicating the nature and purpose of the research. Participants were required to give permission to be contacted for interview by providing contact details on the questionnaire. Confidentiality and anonymity was assured. All names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

Analysis and interpretation
Respondents were placed into five achievement groups based on their performance at secondary school. This study focuses on the High Fliers with five or more GCSE A*- C grades gained at the end of secondary school, and the Underachievers who were mostly those who did not have any GCSEs or other qualifications. Table 1 shows the percentage of respondents in each group.
[It should be noted here that the interview groups were small. Whilst the conclusions drawn cannot be generalised to the population of African Caribbeans as a whole, the research has ‘intuitive appeal’ (Lee, Winfield, and Wilson 1991). The findings are useful in adding the interpretations and perceptions of African Caribbeans and their experiences to the research literature. The analysis attempted to identify trends in the experiences of each group. The findings are supported by the questionnaire data.

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<th>The High Fliers</th>
<th>The Underachievers</th>
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<tr>
<td>Number of respondents</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>14</td>
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<td>Percentage of questionnaire sample</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of interviewees</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td>Percentage of interview sample</td>
<td>41</td>
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The sample

The questionnaire data showed that 41% (12) of the High Fliers were employed in professional and associate professional occupations. A further 28% (8) were students. For the Underachievers only 21% (3) were employed in professional or associate professional occupations, with 14% (2) who were students. However, when they were at school data relating to parents’ occupation showed that for the High Fliers 52% (15) of mothers were in professional or associate professional occupations and 37% (11) of fathers. Ten percent (3) of mothers were employed in manual occupations and 24% (7) of fathers. Only 21% (3) of mothers of the Underachievers were employed in professional or associate professional occupations. No fathers were. Just over half the mothers of the High Fliers were professionals and less than a quarter of mothers of the Underachievers were. However, anecdotal evidence indicates that Black working class parents have ‘middle class’ values in relation to education.

The High Fliers were aged between 16 and 25 years. This group had the youngest age profile of all groups.

Home influences

The High Fliers characteristically came from homes where there was a positive attitude to education, which was supported by practical help and encouragement. Parents gave positive messages to their children about the importance of education and their high expectations. Some respondents remembered these messages verbatim:

They [parents] used to say to me ‘Education is the key to success!’ (Barbara, 20–25 years)
Almost all (92%) the High Fliers reported having support from parents. This was the highest of all groups.

Well, my dad would help me with my school work. He was very keen to get involved and see what was happening. . . . When I was doing the 11 plus, he would get the books for me, and that continued into secondary school. . . . Yes, I remember doing a lot of extra work myself. I remember my dad buying books and so on that weren’t from the school. (Neville, 36–40 years)

Many parents were not satisfied with the schools their children attended; neither did they trust that their children would receive an adequate education from them. One of the older respondents recalled:

But then he [dad] became aware that he needed to keep an eye on schools here, because before he just thought, ‘Oh, the children are misbehaving, so of course the teacher would hit them.’ But he didn’t understand that they were hitting them because they were Black. . . . So it was from that really that he realised that he needed to keep a check. If he wanted the children to get an education here, with all the situation with the racism, he needed to keep a check on school. (Charlene, 36–40 years)

Most High Fliers regularly completed homework and over half as part of a regular routine. They also described the motivation they received from their parents talking about education, its relevance and importance. When asked to whom or what they attributed their success at school almost all said their parents. There has been a prevailing myth about Black parents’ lack of interest and support for their children’s education which has resulted in a perception that this has contributed to the underachievement of African Caribbean pupils. The findings suggest that this is not the case. The active support of Black parents through homework and creating routines cannot be underestimated. Strand (2008) found that despite coming from low SEC homes some ethnic minority pupils made more progress than would be expected due to having a positive academic self-concept and completing homework on a regular basis.

**Personal characteristics**

Respondents in this group described personal characteristics that contributed to their success.

I suppose I’m the type of person that likes to do well. If I set out to do something I like to at least achieve or at least gain something from doing it. So if I put time into it then I actually get something out of it. And probably when you see how you learn from other people as well, when you see how well someone’s done then you can learn some methods from that. (Simon, 20–25 years)
Some High Fliers were driven by competition, others were inspired to achieve through aspects of their religious beliefs and the emphasis within their church on achievement, doing well and having a relationship with God.

I am also very competitive and I’ve always wanted to be the best. (Marvin, 16–19 years)

And I think I am spurred on again by my own sort of Christian belief. And I suppose like with any other thing that I do there is a spiritual side to it. I think that is always what has spurred me on and that’s where my aspirations lie. (Glen, 26–30 years)

Goals emerged as a theme from over half the respondents who spoke about their plans and what they hoped to achieve.

I think I am one of these people, I mean throughout my life I had a very clear idea of what I wanted to be. (Charlene, 36–40 years)

I intend to go to university maybe law, but I am not sure. (Joshua, 16–19 years)

The High Fliers presented a range of motivational factors which propelled them to achieve. These factors came not only from the home but as a result of their interaction within the community, specifically the church. High educational aspirations were demonstrated through descriptions of very clear goals. This is an important element in their success. Unlike the Underachievers, the High Fliers reported few instances of difficulties or problems at home. Strand (2008) suggested that problems at home or family discord is a significant factor in pupils’ progress. The fact that this group did not report problems at home may be the result of harmonious home lives but equally it could be that these experiences were not processed in a way that negatively impacted their experiences and were therefore not reported.

Community

A high proportion of the group were involved in a range of activities outside of school. Most High Fliers (77%) were actively involved in church activities and clubs. Activities such as participating in services and children’s programmes were seen as beneficial. When commenting on his involvement in church and his Christianity one respondent said:

It gives you confidence. It gives you a standard and the reason not to do things. It gives you a better idea about consequences and rewards and in the long run it gives you a more mature outlook on things in general. (Marvin, 16–19 years)
Regular and active involvement in activities at church characterised this group. There appeared to be a positive willingness to be involved. The development of confidence was highlighted, in addition to an increased awareness of individual responsibility. Another factor was their involvement in music tuition. More than half the respondents in this group had instrumental lessons during their school years.

I had organ lessons. Yes, music was something that was dearly loved in our home. I was given the opportunity to learn an instrument and I had always been quite musical.... I suppose there are similarities. In the same way you have to sort of study for exams you have to study for theory and stuff like that. (Glen, 26–30 years)

The requisite skills for learning to play an instrument were also beneficial for school learning. Determination, willingness to practice and having to learn theory contributed to the necessary confidence and experience to excel in the school environment.

Just over half the High Fliers (54%) participated in sporting activities outside school. Other activities that were engaged in were dance classes, study courses, regular visits to libraries and museums. Almost all in this group were involved in some way in activities outside of school. Many of these activities required discipline and personal application in order to achieve specific goals, all characteristics that could be transferred to the academic learning environment. Lareau (2003) describes a process of ‘concerted cultivation’ where ‘middle class’ parents provide a range of planned activities to enrich their children’s lives and experiences. In addition to these experiences, child rearing habits equip children with specific skills that enable them to interact more effectively with schools. This results in children adopting an attitude of entitlement which equips them to question adults and see themselves as having equal rights to what society has to offer. The High Fliers could be seen to have had parents who engaged in this process.

A number of the High Fliers described individuals who served as role models or motivators from within the community who encouraged them.

Talking to different people and them saying basically, ‘You’ve gone past the halfway mark, just finish it. You’re good enough to do it.’ Just encouragement really. (Simon, 20–25 years)

People in the church would give me lots of encouragement. They would give me a lot of examples about things that they had accomplished and how they did it. So I was really inspired by them. (Marvin, 16–19 years)

The High Fliers reported a number of positive influences in their experiences which included the contributions of a wide range of individuals from
within the family, church and the community who provided valuable support and encouragement. These individuals were in some instances described explicitly as role models. In other cases the term role model was not used but the evidence pointed to these individuals functioning as motivators to motivate respondents by their example, words or own achievements; such as where older siblings or relatives had or were attending university.

**School**

The questionnaire responses indicated that 59% (17) of this group attended comprehensive schools. Most of the High Fliers (77%) attended schools that they described as being positive and encouraging. Furthermore, they portrayed these schools as being ‘good’ schools with ‘good’ reputations. Although the definition of ‘good’ might vary between respondents it was clear that high standards, a strict or very disciplined environment and explicit positive messages of encouragement characterised the schools attended. Due to the phenomenological nature of the research it was not possible to collect data on the ethnic composition of the schools or access their policies. In a number of cases schools had closed or merged.

Of the interview group 69% (9) attended comprehensive schools. Two others attended grammar schools, one a private church school and another, a grant maintained school.

Yes it had a very good reputation...we had positive messages that would come across because at the end of every term or half-term we had assemblies. The headmaster would run down everything that happened throughout the year and what course we should be aiming for the next term. (Fiona, 16–19 years)

Oh, there was definitely an atmosphere of working hard and doing your best. It was quite academic and people were expected to pass all of their exams. That was the general tone of things. (Neville, 36–40 years)

Despite the positive messages of encouragement and achievement that were transmitted in school and the disciplined, achievement oriented ethos and atmosphere, there were some underlying negative issues that were revealed in some of the accounts. These issues related to an awareness of being treated differently, in some instances.

...A couple of them [teachers] were very encouraging. But there were a few, obviously, of the old school they didn’t really want to encourage me at all. (Jolene, 41+ years)

I had one incident with the physics teacher at the end of year nine going on to do my GCSEs you had to do an exam to see whether you would be in a high group or low group. I passed to go to the higher group, but the teacher didn’t feel I was confident enough to be in a high group and he put me in the
low group. But I should have been in a high group because of my results. My dad went to see the teacher and he had to sort it out and put me back in the group I was supposed to be in. He wasn’t too pleased about that. (Fiona, 16–19 years)

Research into schools and their impact on African Caribbean children has provided evidence of racism at various levels which negatively affected children and their progress through school (Gillborn and Youdell 2000; Majors 2001; Crozier 2001; Gilborn and Mirza 2000; Rollock 2007). Respondents reported experiences of being treated differently to their peers. Despite this all the High Fliers found teachers with whom they could identify and made time to support them.

I think I was treated fairly. In my later years there was a tutor that I had and she did take time out to actually help me. I think she was my English teacher, she even wanted to come round to help me do some work. (Simon, 20–25 years)

Fewer unpleasant school experiences were relayed compared to the Underachievers and most had positive feelings about school.

The various ecosystems that the High Fliers interacted within the school, home and community provided broadly positive experiences. The negative experiences they described all took place at school but they did not dwell upon them, neither were they reported with strong feelings of injustice, racism or emotion.

The Underachievers

The Underachievers had few GCSEs most had none, neither did they hold other qualifications. They were mostly aged over 31 years. The experiences of this group were in contrast to those of the High Fliers. Fewer parents were described as having positive attitudes to education than the High Fliers and there was a lack of positive support, encouragement or practical help.

There were five interview respondents and 14 questionnaire responses from this group, although some of the parents valued education, most reported that their parents were not successful in translating this into positive and effective practical help and support. Respondents were made aware that education was important but there was a lack of practical help to support these views. Janette said sarcastically:

Oh yes! Education was everything. It was the most important thing and we didn’t know how lucky we were.... And then you’ve got your mother, through our dysfunctional relationship, telling you that you are not going to be anything or whatever. (Janette, 31–35 years)
Few reported receiving support and encouragement from their parents. Despite this there were reservations about the effects of parents’ methods.

They would sit down and help with my homework and they would also give verbal encouragement...I think sometimes it did have an effect because at church we had to go to conventions a lot in the earlier days. And it was like you had to do your homework on the coach and things like that. Because you have to be there all the time at the convention. That was the whole weekend and I used to think that was a bit unfair because I had to try and revise on the coach. (Daniella, 20–25 years)

There was a tendency for parents in this group to be satisfied with the school system. The Underachievers had mixed experiences with homework, although there was evidence of encouragement to complete the homework, there was not the constructive practical help to assist in completing it.

Generally, father never had the time to spend with you to go through stuff. Its like you were told, ‘Have you done your homework?’ and stuff like that. But if you haven’t got the understanding about what you are doing, then I found it was very difficult. (Desmond, 31–35 years)

Amongst the Underachievers there were two respondents who described being motivated by relatives. Janette’s school years were characterised by a number of school exclusions, interaction with social services and children’s homes. However, in the final few terms in a new school with a new foster mum who managed to motivate her, she saw exams as a challenge.

I mean it was a challenge and I remember saying to my mum, my foster mum, I’m going to do this. I’m going to show them that if they had taken the time with me I can be a good student. And I was really, really proud when I got my CSE grade one in English, CSE grade two, biology three, chemistry and the others. And I got my GCE grade C in English and I was just really proud... (Janette, 31–35 years)

While family expectations did not emerge with this group Janette reported negative expectations. Referring to her mother she recalled:

She’d always said I wasn’t going to be anything, or get anywhere. (Janette, 31–35 years)

There were high levels of problems and difficulties at home in this group. Davina described her father’s apparent lack of interest in her work:

At the time I thought it was because he [dad] wasn’t interested. But as I grew older and where I am right now, I don’t think it was because he wasn’t interested I just don’t think he had the confidence... She [mum] tried to encourage us as best she could she had a problem to be dealing with, you know. So
they [parents] had a conflict between themselves. So they were sorting that out. Although they didn’t try to show it to us we knew it was going on. And at the time we knew we picked up hints of it. . . . (Davina, 36–40 years)

I had been expelled from school . . . and basically my mum just gave up hope. She said to me, ‘Oh, you aren’t trying. I don’t see why I should bother. I’m not going to put myself out to try and find you a school or whatever . . . .’ (Janette, 31–35 years)

Despite the less positive experiences within the home there were attempts by parents to give support. However, it was apparent that some of these parents needed guidance themselves on the best and most appropriate ways of supporting their children. Parental involvement in education and home environment has been found to be important in the achievement of the respondents in this research. Studies of the role of parental involvement in general have found positive effects to such an extent that it was raised as an issue in government documentation to schools (DCFS 2008). In the DfEE (2000, 20) guidance on how schools can raise achievement for Minority Ethnic pupils it acknowledges that parental involvement in children’s education is essential.

School
The Underachievers experienced difficulties during their school years. One respondent, despite working quite hard, suffered intense anxiety when taking exams.

But I also had difficulties in exams. I mean, for one, my doctor gave me Valium. It was just in the exam setting. I just couldn’t take the pressure. It was too much. There were quite a few kids that suffered from that. (Paula, 36–40 years)

Amongst the Underachievers, two described their schools as being ‘good’ schools. Others said they attended ‘bad’ schools. But on closer examination, although the schools that were described as being ‘good’ appeared to be schools with desirable reputations, this was not the case in terms of ethos and the messages picked up by the respondents.

Desmond describes his reaction on arriving in the UK and his experience attending a British primary school for the first time.

It was very interesting. It was a culture shock. To be honest with you, looking back at it now, I can say it’s like going through the system; you are on a conveyor belt and going through the system. Start off at one point and as long as you reach the other end irrespective how you reach it didn’t seem to matter and that was the feeling that I got. (Desmond, 31–35 years)

There were two respondents in this group who had changed schools and this impacted on them negatively despite the schools being perceived as ‘good’ ones.
Yeah, I went into Southfields it’s called something else now. And that was meant to be a very good school. But anybody who I went to Southfields with I can’t remember any of them saying that they had a good experience...I went to loads of secondary schools...I didn’t go to school for what would be most of the fourth year because I got expelled. By the time I got back into school I got to spend the last day of the fourth year in Wellington Girl’s school. I’d missed the majority of that year and the previous year. (Janette, 31–35 years)

Overall, the school experiences of the Underachievers were characterised by schools that either lacked a positive and encouraging ethos or where participants had difficulties adjusting to a new school.

Respondents reported a high level of unhelpful experiences with teachers and a lack of support. Positive accounts were often prefaced with negative experiences.

In the other school it was completely different. Because we had come from an inner-city school I think the teachers already had set us aside as being troublemakers. I remember once the head teacher saying, ‘You know this is a completely different ball game. We know that you come from an inner-city school, but you know we have different rules here.’ And he was quite obnoxious and we would argue quite often. I didn’t get on with him at all. There were one or two that were very modern in their thinking, and I got on extremely well with them but the more traditional teachers, I did not get on with at all. (Davina, 36–40 years)

Oh yes, one of our teachers was dismissed because he had a lot of National Front stuff sent to the school. One of the boys in our school, a teacher threw a blackboard eraser at him and he lost the sight in one eye, so that was going on. And it was all brushed under the carpet. And we also had a teacher who was eventually dismissed for sexually harassing the girls. So with those things going on, for the other Black kids, it was tough, you know, it was very tough. And the other thing, we were always pushed into sport. You know Black kids can run, Black kids can do this, we were always pushed into sports. There were trips out and the White kids would always get to do the really classy things and we were always doing running. (Paula, 36–40 years)

The Underachievers reported the highest number of negative experiences; four out of five had negative school experiences. The nature of the negative experiences varied. Only one respondent reported having positive feelings about school.

The school that I came from, we had a really good mixture of children. We got on so well and there [new school] the majority of children were predominately White. There were just a few Blacks there and Asians as well. And there was often conflict amongst children about the colour bar and colour prejudice which to be honest I really didn’t know anything about because I came from a really good mixed school. (Davina, 36–40 years)
Other types of negative experiences included bullying and instances of unfair treatment by teachers.

My parents told me that they were actually informed that although I passed the 11 plus they should understand that if there was a teacher’s child for example, who passed that they would get the first go at the grammar school. (Paula, 36–40 years)

I wanted to be a teacher when I was in primary school and I was told ‘You be a teacher? Never!’ and I would come up with all this stuff and at that time I was under nine and I’ve got these people telling me how these things are nothing to do with me and nobody’s gonna let you be a teacher. (Janette, 31–35 years)

The impact of such negative messages can only be estimated but it contributed to Janette’s lack of achievement in school. One respondent held the school responsible.

I feel that the school failed me because I had so much potential and with the support I mean I did CSEs when I think I should have done O-levels. I was in the top stream there was no reason why I shouldn’t have done O-levels. So I think the school failed me, in the sense that they didn’t support me to reach my full potential. (Paula, 36–40 years)

The underachievers reported explicit instances of racism in school. Their descriptions of the lack of support at school and the lower expectations as well as the limits placed on their aspirations contributed to their underachievement. Indeed, the school and teachers must bear a large share of their responsibility for the educational failure of these respondents. Despite their challenging home circumstances, the school should have provided a safe and supportive environment for these respondents to have the best chance of achieving their full potential. The age profile of this group may have played some part in their underachievement in school. This group unlike the High Fliers would not have benefitted from recent improvements in education particularly with reference to diversity, equality and inclusion. However, in recent work, Maylor et al. (2009) found that primary children continue to report negative attitudes from teachers and described being treated unfairly compared to White children.

Community

Three were involved with church and church clubs. This did not always involve active participation or regular attendance. One respondent referred to regularly changing churches so there was no consistent level of involvement or attendance.

I had an aunt who used to go to church we went to her church, but we went to loads of different churches. My parents always insisted that we went to a
church; they didn’t care what church we went to. We went to a church, but they didn’t come. (Paula, 36–40 years)

The level of activity of respondents in church activities was lower than for the high achieving groups. Despite attendance being reported by respondents the regularity of attendance varied. There was less active involvement and attendance appeared to be forced rather than voluntary. Their experiences were less positive.

Three of the Underachievers had music tuition, but this was not always a pleasant experience:

My sister, she was forced to play the guitar and I was forced to play the guitar and subsequently, I don’t think either of us can play a key on it. We went for quite a while. It was private and then we used to have lessons at school as well. To be honest with you, I weren’t really that keen on it. I’m the sort of person that if I’m going to be doing something it’s got to be because I wanted to do it and not because somebody has forced me to do it. (Desmond, 31–35 years)

In one case, where music lessons were enjoyed they were stopped as a punishment:

...I played the piano at school...I didn’t do grades I can play some things I can read music and I can still play by ear...my lessons were stopped as a punishment. It was the one thing I enjoyed, it was one thing I looked forward to and it was the one way she could punish me... (Janette, 31–35 years)

The Underachievers participated infrequently in positive achievement oriented community activities and the nature of their experiences was often negative. Two respondents in this group talked about having role models. School experiences were mostly negative. This group had fewer positive role models than the successful groups, and experienced more negative interactions within and between the ecosystems of the home, school and community.

**Discussion**

This research was set within an ecosystemic framework which considers the relationship between the ‘various factors that influence people’s perceptions and behaviour’ (Molnar and Lindquist 1989, 10). The factors under consideration were the different social settings which contributed to behaviour and subsequent attainment. The ecosystems referred to by the respondents were the home, school and community. Within these ecosystems the presence of risk and/or protective factors impacted academic success. Across the ecosystems the Underachievers experienced a higher number of risk factors which are defined as any influence that increases the likelihood of the onset, deterioration or continuation of problems (Kirkby and Fraser 1997). The range of
positive activities within the ecosystems of the High Fliers enabled the development of protective factors which ameliorated risks and consequently supported academic success.

The groups described in this research were small, therefore the conclusions drawn cannot be generalised to the African Caribbean population as a whole. This research aimed to investigate the educational experiences of African Caribbean pupils. One specific focus of the work was to identify the factors that support Black pupils’ academic success. It found that regardless of achievement levels most African Caribbean children have had negative experiences at school. Some of these experiences could be attributed to racism and stereotyping. Evidence of racism in schools has support in research undertaken by Majors (2001), Crozier (2001), Sewell (1997) and Gillborn and Mirza (2000). More recently, in an evaluation of the Black Children’s Achievement Programme, Maylor et al. (2009) found that some primary school staff still hold negative views of Black children. In the same report children reported being treated differently because of the colour of their skin.

Despite these negative school experiences, successful children were those who through the complex interaction of a range of positive factors across and within their ecosystems learn to navigate through negative experiences and minimise their impact. This ability to succeed against the odds has been identified as resilience. The concept of resilience originated in the field of psychiatric risk research and considers risk and protective factors which can assist in understanding how respondents in this research for example, were able to achieve despite the negative impact of school (Rutter 1987; Crosnoe and Elder 2004). Resilience can be defined as the ability to recover from hardship due to protective factors. For the successful respondents protective factors were developed as a result of the wide range of support they received in their homes. There was access to a range of family members who provided help with homework, study resources and verbal and practical help, support and encouragement. The high value placed on education by parents was transmitted to their children who in turn had high expectations and a determination to set and achieve clear academic goals.

Through these strong, supportive homes and active involvement in challenging but supportive community activities, protective factors promoted resilience in the High Fliers. Participation in learning to play an instrument was cited by respondents as providing benefits across school subjects and examinations. Respondents’ experience of success, strong motivation and high expectations, developed in the home and community, provided a range of protective factors which enabled them to conceptualise the negative experiences encountered in school in a different way to the Underachievers. Protective factors have been shown to be positive interactions with parents, as well as support in the home, high expectations, positive and constructive interactions, and consistent, positive, activities within the community (Richman and Bowen 1997; Pianta and Walsh 1998).
A number of respondents reported being regularly engaged in church clubs and programmes where involvement was described positively. The impact of religious practices and church involvement on achievement has been identified in a number of other studies (See Tomlinson 1983b; Osler 1997; Channer 1995; Ross 1998; Rhamie and Hallam 2002). The religious practices of African Americans have been found to promote the development of protective factors in children who face the harsh reality of racism, poverty and disadvantage (Haight 2002, 8). In this study, a number of High Fliers referred to religious themes when sharing their motivation and goals. The development of compensatory protective factors within religious communities and belief systems warrants further investigation in the UK context.

The combination of positive support from the range of ecosystems engendered resilience in the High Fliers which helped to counteract the negative impact of school experiences. It is the interaction between the home and community which provides children with what they need to survive the often challenging environment of school. If the school also provides a strong and supportive achievement oriented environment, success is even more likely (Rhamie and Hallam 2002).

The Underachievers in this study were those whose home and community experiences were less positive. They reported a lack of practical help and support at home with little help with homework. In some cases, parents were unable to provide appropriate support and encouragement. There was a high incidence of problems and difficulties at home. Respondents reported marital difficulties resulting in parent’s apparent lack of interest in their school work. Behaviour difficulties contributed to one parent giving up on attempts to help their child. But there were reports of parents not having the knowledge or skills to support their children academically. This contributed to a higher level of risk factors in the lives of the Underachievers. It is recognised that parental engagement is linked to socio-economic status. However, where schools provide targeted support to parents from ethnic and social groups who are less likely to engage with school, there is an increase in their engagement with their children’s learning (Harris and Goodall 2007).

Reports of the lack of support at school, racism, negative stereotyping and low expectations combined to place respondents at greater risk of underachieving. Furthermore, the low educational attainment of parents and their employment in low-level occupations added to these risk factors. One possibility for respondents to develop resilience could have been through positive engagement with community activities. However, this involvement was inconsistent and in some cases forced. Respondents’ reports of their interactions within the community were largely negative. As a result these children were more vulnerable and susceptible to the detrimental impact of negative school experiences in short, they lacked the resilience to succeed against the odds.
It must be remembered that schools and not parents have the legal responsibility to educate children and improve their experiences (Gillborn and Mirza 2000). In the accounts provided the schools clearly failed to provide adequate support and guidance to enable these children to overcome difficult home circumstances to be able to achieve. The successful African Caribbean pupils were better equipped to cope with the demands and pressures they faced within schools. The burden of responsibility for the success of these respondents fell to the families and community to secure achievement.

However, it is important to note that resilience should not suggest that the responsibility lies within the child or even the family (Rutter 1993). Resilience is not a fixed concept and successful children may be resilient in terms of school success but not in other contexts (Rutter 1999). The identification of factors that contribute to resilience in this study and its subsequent impact on academic achievement must be seen in the context of negative school experiences. Some of the success literature highlights the ways in which successful Black pupils have developed ‘compensatory factors’ (Byfield 2008); a ‘buffer against racism’ (Channer 1995); and resilience and protective factors (Rhamie 2007) to counter negative school experiences. Other success research describes Black children as achieving ‘despite the obstacles’ (Rhamie and Hallam 2002). Pollard (1989) suggests that it is the individual, and factors within families and communities which mediate against adverse circumstances. The question remains why Black pupils in British schools continue to experience challenging and sometimes hostile school and classroom environments that require the development of protective factors to mitigate the negative impact of school experiences.

Strand (2007, 2008) acknowledges that despite possessing characteristics that have the greatest impact on attainment such as high parental and pupil educational aspirations, positive academic self-concept and high socio-economic classification, African Caribbean pupils continue to underachieve. This continuing underachievement requires robust and far reaching measures to ensure that schools fulfil their responsibilities.

Schools have responsibility for educating African Caribbean pupils, to achieve their full potential. This research highlights some of the failings of teachers and schools to fulfil their responsibilities towards these pupils. The issue of teachers who exhibit negative attitudes towards African Caribbean pupils is one that continues to surface (Gillborn 1990; Wrench and Hassan 1996; Wright, Weekes, and McGlaughlin 2000; Blair 2001; Rhamie & Hallam 2002; Maylor et al. 2009). Aside from dealing with racism, the answer, in part, may lie in teachers’ lack of training in minority ethnic issues and race equality (Osler and Morrison 2000; Cline et al. 2002; Abbas 2002; Gaine 2005). This is an issue that has been given a higher profile by Ofsted but continues to be problematic (Osler and Morrison 2000). Recent
research on trainee teacher’s views of race, inclusion and diversity found that trainees believed that these issues needed to be made a key priority in training. Furthermore, the report recommended that a compulsory module on race, inclusion and diversity should be implemented on teacher training courses (Bhopal, Harris, and Rhamie 2009).

There is a need for all schools to adopt and maintain high standards and expectations which are seen as necessary for all pupils regardless of ethnic origin or gender (DfEE 2000). Yet the evidence suggests that teachers’ perception of ethnic minority pupils proportionately affects their achievement (Wrench and Hassan 1996; Gillborn and Gipps 1996; Blair 2001; Maylor et al. 2009). Once teachers’ high expectations of African Caribbean pupils become the norm this will contribute to changes in the expectations African Caribbean pupils have of themselves, impact on their feelings about school and create positive environments where high achievement can flourish. Thus schools need to begin to address the ways in which they undermine resilience and seek to increase opportunities to support it.

The value of this research lies in its contribution to an understanding of the factors contributing to differential levels of academic achievement in African Caribbean pupils. It presents their personal views and perspectives on the reasons for their high or low achievement. The development of resilience enables an understanding of the complexities of ethnicity and school achievement and helps to explain the processes which affect it.

Many African Caribbean children face the challenge of low social class status and the economic burden this creates for their parents, families and communities. They also encounter the challenge of being Black in a predominantly White society which leaves them having to cope with negotiating their way through a complex, ambiguous and sometimes hostile world where the messages they absorb about themselves are not always positive. It is within this climate that Black children need to develop resilience in order to succeed. This resilience is strengthened through active, positive, support in the home, as well as supportive and achievement oriented, confidence building community endeavours. These activities which support Black academic achievement need to be maintained through adequate funding and the provision of support and guidance for parents. Furthermore, the school system must continue to work towards providing safe, secure and accepting learning environments that will ensure Black pupils have the best opportunity to succeed. Once schools, parents and communities work together in collaboration only then can the best outcomes for Black pupils be secured.

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Notes
1. A version of this article was presented at BERA University of Warwick 2006.
2. General Certificate of Secondary Education the current school leaving qualification for England.
3. It must be noted that the term success or low achievement relates only to academic performance in school and not to the current status of those who participated in the study.
4. Certificate of Secondary Education a former end of school leaving qualification for lower to average ability pupils.
5. General Certificate of Education also known as the O’ level or Ordinary level was an end of school qualification for higher ability pupils.

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