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Black Youth Culture Blamed as Pupils Fail

Gaby Hinsliff and Martin Bright

A respected black academic last night sparked a furious debate after he claimed his community was 'not interested' in intellectual activity and blamed black youth culture for the poor school record of Afro-Caribbean boys and girls.

In an exclusive interview with The Observer, Tony Sewell, a university lecturer who has just finished an inquiry into soaring levels of exclusions among black pupils from a London school, claimed that too much concern with money and consumer goods was almost as damaging to black pupils' chances as racism.

He warned that fashionable black youth culture inevitably crossed over to white teenagers, and said tackling it would benefit all pupils.

'What we have now is... not only the pressure of racism, but black peer grouping [which] has become another pressure almost as big as institutional racism was.'

Black children had gained much-needed self-esteem from their youth culture becoming part of the mainstream, he conceded. 'But that culture is not one that, for example, is interested in being a great chess player, or intellectual activity.'

'It is actually to do with propping up a big commercial culture to do with selling trainers, selling magazines, rap music and so on.'

Sewell's comments provoked an angry response from others in the black community and ignited an acrimonious debate about the real causes of under-achievement in British schools. Black community leaders accused him of encouraging a 'blame the victim' culture.

The Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) is already investigating a string of allegations that head teachers unfairly excluded black children. Official figures show that this is four times as likely to happen to Afro-Caribbean children as to whites. A report to be published tomorrow by the United Nations Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination is expected to criticise the UK.

Lee Jasper, who advises London Mayor Ken Livingstone on race relations, said: 'Tony Sewell... is somebody who gets attention for saying the things that well-meaning white liberals would naturally agree with.

'I don't believe that any community can suffer the levels of unemployment and missed education that we have had without suffering from the kind of problems that are now apparent.

'It is a "blame the victim" culture yet again – if it's not the Government saying it's lone mothers that are the problem, it's the aggressive nature of black kids.'

British schools were suffering a 'race crisis', particularly over exclusions, said Jasper. 'There is a raft of evidence that white female teachers find black boys intimidating, difficult to deal with. They have an expectation about their behavior which tends to dictate the quality of teaching,' he said.

An Ofsted survey last year found that Afro-Caribbean boys were often the lowest-performing group in GCSE exams. It asked schools urgently to establish 'what is happening to Afro-Caribbean boys to cause a good start in primary schools to turn into such a marked decline, and take action to reverse it'.

Maxie Hayles, chair of the Birmingham Racial Attacks Monitoring Unit, said in his submission to the UN that black children 'are often labelled by teachers as disruptive and less intelligent than white pupils', creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

'It would be daft to think that all social exclusions are based around institutional racism,' he said.

'But I would never attack black culture... Black youths need something: they feel debased, they need something to identify with.'

Sewell, a lecturer at the University of Leeds who investigated black parents' allegations of unfair exclusions from Malory comprehensive school in Lewisham, south-east London, said he was telling a truth that liberal white researchers dare not.

He admits he was one of the lucky few blacks to succeed academically: 'I teach 400 trainee teachers and there is not one black face.'