

Intelligence testing and 'ESN' schools (draft version 2)

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Learning objectives

The focus of this lesson is to teach Key Stage 4 students:

- What is intelligence testing and how it was originally developed.
- How intelligence testing contributed to Black Caribbean children being sent disproportionately to 'Educationally Sub-normal' schools in England.
- How intelligence testing has impacted the Black Caribbean community in the England then and in the present day.
- How the Black Caribbean community responded to this scandal.

Introduction

In 1948 the British Nationality Act gave people from British colonies the right to live and work in Britain. The British government needed workers to help fill post-War labour shortages and rebuild the economy following World War Two. Those who immigrated to Britain from 1948-1971 became known as the Windrush generation. They were mainly from the Caribbean: several hundred passengers were Jamaican, but others arrived from islands including Trinidad, St Lucia, Grenada and Barbados.

Because of this, larger numbers of immigrant children entered the British education system. During the 1960s-1970s, psychologists administered intelligence tests to determine whether children should be sent to schools for the 'Educationally Sub-Normal' or ESN schools.

Because of differences in culture and language and racial stereotyping, children of Black Caribbean descent of average or above average intelligence were sent disproportionately to ESN schools. This had a significantly negative impact on the children affected and the Black Caribbean community as a whole.

Relevance to curriculum

This teaching resource has been developed with Key Stage 4 students in mind. The below are suggestions of where the resource could fit within the KS4 curriculum.

Citizenship or PSHE

When looking at how education has changed over time, or to spark discussion about educational inequality.

History

This could be used to illustrate the experiences and treatment of migrants to Britain after World War Two as part of the AQA 'Empire, Migration and the People' course, the OCR 'Migrants to Britain' course.

GCSE Sociology

Factors affecting educational achievement such as social class, gender and ethnicity and including the work of Halsey on class based inequalities and Ball on parental choice and competition between schools

- processes within schools affecting educational achievement such as streaming, labelling and the self-fulfilling prophecy and including the work of Ball on teacher expectations and Willis on the creation of counter school cultures

GCSE Psychology

Compulsory topic: Development

- stages of development, including cognitive and brain development
- the role of education and intelligence including Piaget's Theory of Cognitive

Development, assimilation and accommodation, and the four stages of cognitive development

- the effects of learning on development including Dweck's Mindset Theory and Willingham's Learning Theory

Teacher's notes

This lesson has two optional videos as a starter activity to introduce the topic to students in an engaging way.

The first lesson source is an oral history video of the first Black educational psychologist in Britain, Waveney Bushell. Waveney was part of the Windrush generation who immigrated to Britain and trained as an educational psychologist here. In the video, she talks about her experiences in coming to Britain, the intelligence testing that was used on children in the 1960s-70s and the impact of this on immigrant children. It is important for students to think about the individual experiences of the immigrants settling into a new culture during this time and the adversity they faced.

The second and third lesson sources are the reproduced intelligence tests which were used on children in the 1960s-70s to determine whether they should be sent to ESN schools. They are the Weschler Preschool & Primary Scale of Intelligence (WPPSI) and the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale. Students will engage with the tests critically to think about the type of language being used and how immigrant children would have felt being labelled as 'educationally subnormal'

Background

What is intelligence testing and why was it developed?

The idea of measuring intelligence started in psychology in the early 20th century. The development of intelligence testing was significantly influenced by the societal values and scientific understandings of each era and focussed on solving practical issues of the time.

The tests enabled the mass testing of large groups, reflecting the era's emphasis on efficiency and standardisation. Pioneers in testing adapted these tests according to societal needs, leading to the widespread adoption in education and work.

The intelligence tests often ignored factors like the cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds of the participants and were heavily influenced by the culture and experience of those who developed the tests.

Eugenics and intelligence testing

From the beginning, intelligence testing was heavily influenced by eugenics (the term given to the scientifically inaccurate theory of selective breeding in the attempt to improve the human race). Being able to measure a person's intelligence fitted in with eugenics' need to label, rank and group individuals.

During the 1950s and the 1960s, psychologists added credibility to a view popular since the early 1910s that society needed to be protected from the growing numbers of those labelled 'unfit', 'feeble-minded', and 'sub-normal' due to their mental disabilities.

To identify those with mental disabilities, psychologists created a host of measurements and tests which were then introduced and applied in schools to demonstrate the intellectual abilities of children. These tests described and diagnosed according to what psychologists argued were 'objective' methods capable of explaining the intellectual and developmental variations between children.

Who were the Windrush generation and why did they come over to Britain?

HMT (His Majesty's Transport) Empire Windrush was a passenger ship which, in 1948, is famous of carrying 1,027 adults and children to the UK to settle there. Several hundred passengers were Jamaican, but others arrived from islands including Trinidad, St Lucia, Grenada and Barbados. These travellers - and those on other ships which came to the UK until 1971 - became known as the Windrush generation.

In 1948 the British Nationality Act gave people from colonies the right to live and work in Britain. The British government needed workers to help fill post-War labour shortages and rebuild the economy following World War Two. Caribbean countries were also struggling economically and job vacancies in the UK offered an opportunity for them. Many of those who came became manual workers, drivers, cleaners, and nurses in the newly established National Health Service (NHS).

What were ESN schools?

From the early 20th Century, the term 'educationally sub-normal' (ESN) was used in the UK to refer to children with below average intelligence.

At this time, British educational policies focused on separating children deemed 'educationally sub-normal' from the wider school population. These children started to be sent to separate ESN schools.

ESN schools often had less resources and less well-trained teachers teaching the students. ESN schools were also not meant to help children achieve good grades, but rather to teach them to function in everyday society.

During the 1960s-1970s, Intelligence tests were often used to determine whether children should be sent to ESN schools. Children as young as four years old would be tested. Due to the type of questions asked (e.g. definitions or identification of very British words), newly arrived Black Caribbean children would often score poorly on these tests. Immigrant children would also often experience racism from teachers and from within the curriculum itself.

Psychologists administered the tests and children with a low score were sent to ESN schools. Black Caribbean children were sent disproportionately to ESN schools compared with White students of the same ability.

What was the long-term effect on individuals and the community?

The misuse of intelligence tests contributed to reinforcing and perpetuating educational and social inequalities among Caribbean communities in the UK. This has had lasting effects on perceptions of intelligence, educational policy, and social dynamics.

Many children who were sent to ESN schools incorrectly were never sent back to a mainstream school. They often developed poor self-esteem and were unable to get a good education. This would affect their future careers and the rest of their lives. Many children who had these experiences felt ashamed that they had been sent to an ESN school.

Although ESN schools were eventually closed, they had a lasting effect on the Black community. Studies have shown that Black boys are still more likely to get expelled from school than any other ethnic group in the UK.

Since the Windrush generation, the underachievement of Black Caribbean students in the English school system has persisted to the present day. Over the past four decades, national research has shown that their achievements persistently lag behind the average achievement of their peers and the gap was growing at the end of primary and secondary education.¹

¹ Feyisa Demie & Rebecca Butler, *The Educational Attainment of Black Caribbean Pupils in Lambeth*, 2022

Another effect that is seen today is that there are very few Professors from Black Caribbean backgrounds. There are also very few people with Black Caribbean heritage represented in specific subjects e.g. psychology.

What was the response from the Black Caribbean community?

The global context and influence of the civil rights movement led to increased scrutiny of these tests' biases. In the UK, the misclassification of Black Caribbean children into ESN schools highlighted the cultural biases inherent in these tests, sparking debates on educational equality and reform.

Individuals in the Black community trained as educational psychologists to make sure that the Black children they assessed were tested fairly. They, and many others, campaigned and worked with the local education system to stop Black children being sent to ESN schools unfairly. They worked with the parents of Black children to inform them of the racism within the educational system.

The Black community also set up Supplementary Schools specifically for Black children to get them up to speed once they arrived in Britain and help teach them about their heritage. These schools were run by volunteers to help counteract the regular racism Black children experienced in British schools.

Testing in the present day

Cultural bias in intelligence testing has been a point of contention for a long time, with studies showing that tests often reflect the values and knowledge of the test's culture of origin. Efforts have been made to make tests more culturally sensitive, though the challenge remains to create assessments that accurately reflect diverse intelligences without bias.

The use of these intelligence tests persists today, and the most popular individually administered intelligence tests are still the Stanford- Binet Intelligence Scale and the Wechsler Intelligence Scales (updated versions of source 2).

Videos

Watch video 1 for history and video 2 for psychology and sociology.

[Video 1 - Introduction Video](#) - 10 minutes (introduces the Windrush generation and ESN schools).

Reflective questions:

What do you think the Windrush generation hoped for when they first came to the UK?

Do you think everyone in the UK would have been welcoming to them?

What do you think a child would have felt being sent to an ESN school?

What do you think of the term 'educationally subnormal'?

How do you think being sent to an ESN school would affect you?

Video 2 - ESN schools video - 7 minutes (Focuses on ESN schools only).

Reflective questions:

What does it mean to be intelligent? Does it mean the same for everyone?

How do you know how intelligent you are?

What do you think a child would have felt being sent to an ESN school?

What do you think of the term 'educationally subnormal'?

How do you think being sent to an ESN school would affect you?

Sources

Source 1 - Waveney Bushell oral history

Coming to the UK & social life (time stamp 02:40-04:30 & 06:00-08:10)

- What do you think about the experience of Black Caribbean immigrants moving to the UK?
- What do you think Waveney's experience says about Britain at that time?

The Importance of Supplementary Schools (time stamp 09:00-13:30)

- How do you think different education systems would affect how the children learnt?
- Why do you think the Caribbean community felt they needed to start supplementary schools?
- Why is it important to learn about different communities' history and culture?

Intelligence testing (time stamp 25:45-27:30 & 31:20-33:00)

- How do you think it would feel to be tested with language you don't understand? What affect would this have on how you feel about yourself?
- What do you think of Waveney stopping using intelligence tests? Do you agree with this?

ESN schools (time stamp 38:05-41:19)

- Why do you think children acted differently in supplementary schools than in their mainstream schools?
- Do you think it was important to have someone of the same culture testing a child from the same culture?

Response from the Black Caribbean community (time stamp 41:20-44:50)

- Why do you think the Caribbean community felt they had to take matters into their own hands?

Source 2 – intelligence tests

Put the class into 5 groups. Give each group a briefcase containing a Weschler Preschool & Primary Scale of Intelligence and a Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale.

Have the groups work through the tasks of the test and think about:

- What did you notice about the types of words / language that was used? Would a child who had recently come to the UK know all these words?
- Think about the pictures that were used, what did you notice about them?
- How do you think those being tested felt during the process? Would they have been able to perform their best?
- Imagine the student felt that the examiner already felt negatively towards them, do you think that would affect their performance?
- What do these tests show us about how intelligence was viewed in the 1960s/70s?

Once the groups have worked through the tests, have the class come together to discuss the above questions.

External links / further resources

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m000w81h/subnormal-a-british-scandal>