

## **'...to be seen and not heard': Caribbean Migrant Children**

With parents coming from St Vincent & the Grenadines in 1960, I was in the UK and went to secondary school not far from here, Daneford Boys School, which became Bethnal Green Technical College and today Bethnal Green Academy.

Much has been written about what we now call the Windrush generation. So I won't speak about how these West Indian migrants were invited to rebuild Post War Britain –the NHS, London Transport, British Rail and then being told they were 'stealing our jobs'.

I won't speak about the struggle of finding somewhere to live meant encountering signs saying 'No Coloured, No Irish, No Dogs' and experiencing racism on the street. West Indians met each other here and forged bonds with each other to survive this hostile environment.

I won't speak about SUS, police brutality, the criminalisation of black youth, death in police custody, corruption, institutional racism.

I won't even speak about what Stuart Hall called the unstoppable 'multicultural drift' in British society and how the urban landscape has been creolised through language, music, fashion, style, dress, food.

I won't speak about how the activism of migrants has civilised British society with legislation for racial, sexual and equal opportunities.

Europe has always had refugees knocking at it's door often portrayed as coakroaches that we don't want in our cupboard rather than human beings with rights.

Children tend to be forgotten in the migrant story, especially those left behind by Caribbean parents who came to the Mother Country in the 1950s and 1960s. The experience of separation was traumatic. Eventually, they were sent for, and their second trauma was leaving behind the people who raised them. Often arriving in Britain during winter they were completely unprepared they were met by their parents and siblings who were strangers to them. These newly migrant children were often seen as interlopers in established families, which was another trauma for them.

It was a hand grabbing a plant from the soil of one continent and being left on the ground of another to find one's own roots and survive. The way these migrant children spoke and their Caribbenness was laughed at and seen as backward, and regardless of the tears they couldn't return home. They had to adjust, adapt, acculturate and sometimes even assimilate, in order to survive.

The quality of Caribbean education was/is of a high standard, and many teachers found that these migrant children were more literate than the indigeous white children. Migrant children would create their own syncretic fusion of Caribbean creole, usually Jamaican, with regional English that would eventually become the language of Britain's urban landscape today. They would become the Rude Boys with the style, fashion, dress and chat that would inspire white working class boys – the Mods, Hards Mods, the Skin heads, who wanted to dress, walk, talk, be like them in clubs dancing to Ska music and Rocksteady.

While many West Indian migrant children were often intelligent, academically gifted and creative talented, they like many black children were represented and treated as educationally subnormal and labelled as social problems waiting to happen: suspensions, exclusions and failing from and at school.

Black parents were active in the Supplementary and Saturday School movement, which emerged in direct response to the racism that their children were experiencing in schools. Their resourcefulness, innovation, resilience, and hard-working ethos challenges the myth that there is no entrepreneurism in the black communités. The Partner Hand/Susu was used to save up and buy houses, with many migrants owning properties that they rented out to each other. They also established barber shops, hairdressers, record shops, grocers, take-aways, restaurants, blues parties, sound systems, clubs, Notting Hill Carnival. Always adapting, creating and recreating, striving forward, West Indian migrants and their children stood up for their rights, and in solidarity with others. This is inspite of the fact that as Linton Kwesi Johnson's poem said in the 1970s - *Inglan is ah Bitch*.

And yet this experience of being 'othered' is not particular to Caribbean migrant children or any other migrant children. This was a generational moment when all children were expected to be seen and not heard where the parental attitude was, 'Well you have food in your belly, shirt on your back, what more do you want'. Many of this generation have had to

grapple with their experiences of tough love through healing so that patterns are not passed onto the next generation, their children.

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