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Henry, William Anthony (2020) Schooling, education, and the reproduction of inequality: understanding black and minority ethnic attitudes to learning in two London schools. *Race Ethnicity and Education*. ISSN 1361-3324

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2020.1798386>

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Schooling, Education and the Reproduction of Inequality: Understanding Black and Minority Ethnic attitudes to learning in two London Schools

Abstract

The argument here places the personal reflections of BAME students and educators at the forefront in this discussion of racial inequity in the British educational system. The contributors are all stakeholders, in a certain sense as they have an investment in schooling, either as student, teacher or educator, in a way that cannot be reduced to the four walls of the classroom. It features interviews and personal communications that shed light on what needs to be done to correct the gross disparities in educational outcomes for BAME students. The emphasis is therefore placed on the quality of their contributions and the importance of having a positive black presence in their teaching and learning environments. It features some candid reflections on the rights or wrongs of having a Black History Month (BHM) celebration, especially in the wake of the introduction in 2008 of Black History as the 'Slave Trade' in the National Curriculum, which many considered, and still believe was ill thought through at the time.

Key Words: racialisation; cultural diversity; education; inequality; intersubjectivity, school curriculum

Introduction

Bernard Coard published *'How the West Indian child is made educationally sub-normal in the British School System'* in 1971, highlighting the need for a radical rethink in the way black children were taught in schools. His argument, regarding their supposed 'educational underachievement' (Dove 1994; Sewell 1997; Majors 2001; Lindsay 2003; Gillborn and Kirton 2010), when compared to their white and Asian counterparts, centred on the failure of the State to address the racial and structural issues that affected their schooling experiences. That year, the Guardian Newspaper published a chapter from Coard's 'pamphlet' on its 'Comments pages, and a row over the education of black children, and the failures of the system, has raged ever since' (Coard 2005). At the time it was suggested that:

Black history and culture, i.e. the history of Black people throughout the Caribbean, the Americas, Africa and Asia, should be made a part of the curriculum of all schools, for the benefit of the Black and white children...Indeed its exclusion from most school curricula constitutes nothing short of criminal negligence (or prejudice) in the educational sphere. (Coard 1991, 44)

Coard clearly states that one practical way to offset the way schooling 'made' black children 'Educationally Sub Normal', was to introduce a more balanced and equitable curriculum, featuring a black cultural and historical presence. Its criminally negligent or prejudicial omission is therefore tantamount to a form of deliberate erasure, causing what constitutes a serious problem in what is being taught at school. Equally, how a problem is defined is crucial to the manner in which it is approached and subsequently tackled, inasmuch as this ultimately determines how significant the solution will be. If, the role played by 'systemic racism' (Feagin and Ducey 2018), as a major factor that impinges the efficacy of more inclusive curricula development, is overlooked, missed or denied, there will be no scope to consider or accommodate broader definitions of the problem. For instance, in 2005 the DfES stated the need 'to target underachievement of young black people' (Gillies 2016, 2), fuelling further debate on black attitudes to learning. Coard, amongst others, was interviewed in the aforementioned Guardian article to address this matter and he argued:

Governments acting from above to solve or correct any systemic or structural or deep-rooted problem, even with the best of intentions and the political will to effect radical change, will fail if they fail to act in tandem with 'from below'.

Crucially then, Coard speaks to why there needs to be a collaboration between successive Governments, as representative of the 'above', to take on board the views of the 'below'; teachers, parents, grassroots activists etc. to institute a 'comprehensive' overhaul of the educational system. A perspective that was endorsed by Labour MP Dianne Abbot who suggested in the same article, 'if the authorities had listened to him, we wouldn't have the crisis we have now' (2005, 8). Almost five decades since Coard's publication society is still faced with the reality that little has changed in the educational experiences of BAME children. That is why the argument here will feature the crucial voices of students, their teachers and other educators, particularly in light of the

'Windrush Scandal'¹ and the post-war experiences of Caribbean migrants and their British born generations. It is important to consider the overly negative schooling experiences of the Windrush migrants, as they are inextricably linked to contemporary 'attitudes to learning' (Dove 1994), to which Coard suggests:

What is particularly important to note is that the children of the 1960's and 1970's whom the British education system failed are the parents and grandparents of today's children -- large numbers of whom are being suspended and "excluded" from schools, or placed in "special units" or streams. (Coard 2005)

Coard's poignant insight adds a qualitative dimension to the ongoing debates around black attitudes to learning, read as 'underachievement', that are divorced from the historical factors that can perhaps explain such attitudes. A factor that is central to current debates about the need for a 'Black Curriculum' (Arday 2020), because 'with no mandatory place on a highly Eurocentric national curriculum, black British history continues to be viewed as insignificant' (Stennett 2020). Stennett, speaks to the need for a positive black presence to be included in what 'all children' are being taught within schools, which partially explains why so many black students and their peers remain disaffected, disengaged and disillusioned with the National Curriculum. Consequently, the lack of a 'viable and valuable black historical representation that predates African Chattel Enslavement' (Henry 2007, 2012), leads to many students becoming an absent presence within the classroom. Thus, the students and teachers who have an awareness of a positive black historical presence need their perspectives recognised within national, educational discourse. Consequently, consideration is given to what Black History Month means in relation to the National Curriculum, to further our understanding of BAME antipathy within the formal schooling environment. Moreover, as will be detailed in the Methodology section below, I have a personal investment in the issues raised here due to my own negative relationship with education and schooling.

¹ June 22nd, 1948, the passengers aboard the ship HMT Empire Windrush disembarked at Tilbury Docks in Essex. The name 'Windrush Scandal' is derived from an aspect of the Conservative Government's 'Hostile Environment'.

Methodology

I am of the racial and cultural group in question here and was expelled from school at 15 and then from college at 16, so I have first-hand experience of a negative relationship with State schooling that perhaps adds value to my argument. I recognise that my individual educational experiences are visceral ones that carry with them an emotional investment, which I will use in tandem with my academic training as an 'objective', participant observer. These experiences are crucial to my work with cohorts of disenfranchised and disaffected students, who are generally on the cusp of exclusion when I am called in to reason with them. One way I do so is through my 'GOAL MODELS: pathways to success' programme (Henry 2015; Henry and Mullings-Lawrence 2017) that I have delivered in schools and Pupil Referral Units for several years. As such, my work with them and how I will frame my argument here, will be through an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is a qualitative method that facilitates the exploration of the 'personal experiences' (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011) of the participants, to ascertain how they 'make sense of the world' as posited by Smith, Flower and Larkin (2009). Therefore, my focus is on rendering the intersubjective experiences of the respondents when considering the lack of BAME representation within the formal school setting; both in the physical and curricular sense. Consideration is therefore given to the connection between 'personal experience' as an ethnographic tool and the impact of educational policy on the minds of the participants. Ordinarily individuals interpret the world directly with minimal self-awareness whereas IPA demands an internal focus upon the 'normative frames of reference' that enable us to make sense of our divergent world views.

It is important to declare this here because 'qualitative research is influenced by the researcher's political values' (Silverman 2001, 25) and this form of enquiry seeks to privilege the views and perspectives of the BAME voices featured here as valid sources of multifaceted knowledge. As such, I draw upon and add to the discussion of the value of autoethnography to 'concentrate on ways of producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience' (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011, 2), in the 'decolonising of research methodology' (Smith 2012). Similarly, 'standpoint epistemology' can be used to create dialogue based on a sense of racial and cultural similarity with my respondents, so there is the

potential for an ethnographic richness in detail that is often absent in these types of discussion to be forthcoming. Thus my 'value standpoint' (Tomlinson 1982) is made clear in this way, but equally the possible imposition of my 'value judgement' on the participants should be considered, and where possible addressed or eliminated. I say this because when dealing with the thorny issues of racism and white privilege in the educational system, the 'value position' I adopt as a black scholar may be 'unacceptable' to many within the field of study. However, 'autoethnography is both process and product' (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011, 1), so by making this 'value position' unequivocally known, any claims made here are localised (on a micro level), because the paper draws on 22 interviews with year 10 students and two teachers in secondary schools that I have worked in for over a decade.

The research was conducted in two inner London schools: Lakeside School and Southside College. The cohort from Lakeside School was a mixed group of five girls and five boys from BAME backgrounds, whilst the cohort from Southside College were black boys of African or African Caribbean background. Pseudonyms are used to anonymise the names of the schools, the students and the teachers who have participated in this research project, as agreed with the Headteachers of both schools, in line with the 'General Data Protection Regulation' (GDPR 2018). The data collected from the personal narratives therefore assist an exploration of the tangible links between their attitudes to education, as students and staff, and the roles of race, ethnicity and culture in these shared experiences.

“We’re not in it, so why should we care?” Overcoming antipathy in the classroom

Social commentators who interpret the behaviour of black children, in particular, and their attitudes to learning, see their actions as primarily negative by often ignoring how the historically oppressed resist or react to racist, exclusionary practices.² Arguably then, there is an overreliance on perceived negative aspects of behaviour that are read as particular to black youth within the educational arena (Sewell 1997; Graham

² The DfE (2018) data shows Black Caribbean pupils are three times more likely to be permanently excluded from school than their white peers, yet only 3.5% of the UK population are classified as black.

2017), including: racial stereotyping; low teacher expectations; bad parenting; negative peer groups; and poor life choices. Hence:

This is an interesting point, as it reminds me of the exclusion of black boys as two-fold: One is the geographical separation from school, i.e. when they are excluded from the school premises etc.; and, two, the psychological exclusion they experience while being present in the room. (Poonam Madar 'personal communication', 2018)

Madar speaks to why the absence of a notable black presence in schools, has a negative effect on black student subjectivity that transcends the idea of merely attending school. By highlighting the idea of a 'geographical separation' from the physical premises of the school and in that which they are expected to learn, Madar speaks to why they do not see themselves as stakeholders in their own futures. For instance, according to Jason whose grandparents are from Jamaica and Dominica, there is confusion around being classed as 'Caribbean British':

In school, as well, they don't really teach you anything about where you come from. They're just like: "If you're born here, you're a British child, and you're, like, Caribbean British." That's all you're classed as. You don't go way back, you're just British. That's what they make sure, that you're known as British. (Jason, student Lakeside School, 2018)

Jason highlights how several factors around the process of identity and identification are confusing, for in the first instance he clearly 'comes from' Britain, yet he has an awareness that being British is not simply about where you were physically born. He knows that his grandparents are also British but the racialised subjectivities at play means their Britishness is a qualitatively different experience from his. They have a sense of 'home', as in coming from beyond these shores, that provides a tangible link through a history that lives in the present through 're-memories' (Morrison 1986; Gordon 1998; Henry 2006), whereas for him this is 'home', which speaks to the powerful contradictions he experiences when he suggests, 'You don't go way back, you're just British'. This omission in the school curriculum of a tangible historical link between Jason and his grandparents, in what is supposed to be a 'culturally diverse' society is problematic in many ways. For instance, whilst recognising that discussions around history and ideas of racialised, cultural or ethnically marked difference are important, we need to consider that more black curricula and teacher representation

are not viable solutions in and of themselves. I am not suggesting that these factors are not important; rather I am stating that there are adverse effects that need to be challenged for the benefit of all children in a culturally diverse society. Thereby, agreeing with Madar's point that an understanding of the 'psychological exclusion' of those 'present' within the classroom is paramount, when we consider Britishness in the broader sense of evoking powerful contradictions regarding identity and belonging.

The powerful contradictions between Jason and his grandparents are intergenerational and intercultural where one history is 'known' through the experiential, and the other is not because it is not formally taught. Understanding this tension is useful when discussing contemporary concerns that mirror historical occurrences, as the links can be explicitly made in a relatable and palatable way; that which, in this case, aids our understanding of the sense of antipathy Jason shares above. For instance, Warmington et al (2018) warn of a lack of focus when tackling issues around 'cultural diversity', to the detriment of addressing forms of 'racial inequality' (John 2006) within the educational arena. Graham argues this is due to 'white teachers' not recognising a 'culture gap', nor the subsequent 'need for lessons in black culture and black history' (2017, 293). Consequently, it must be appreciated that 'racial identities and divisions are also produced within educational sites (including policy)' (Warmington et al 2018, 411). Thus:

I have been teaching for a long time and notice there is a lot of talk around equalities and diversity but hardly any discussion about how race affects the way children learn and behave. We get, this is what the children need, and this is what they've got to have. We know it's a formula, and a spell. Some of them, like the young man with the afro (Stephen, featured below), are bang on the money, all the time. He knows. He's a spirit that knows. He doesn't need to be told; he can work it out for himself. (Ms Myers, teacher Lakeside School, 2018)

The point is when it comes to discussing the schooling experiences of black children, many who determine the policies that children are bound by seem to believe 'that racism has declined in social salience' (Warmington et al 2018, 410). Yet Ms Myers' observation that 'we know it's a formula, and a spell', speaks to the chasm in thinking between policy makers and those who have to deliver this 'formula' to their students. Equally, it is a damning indictment on the widely held belief that 'equality and diversity' and not the racialisation of others is what needs to be addressed. Consequently, the 'social salience of racism' no longer being an issue in the

educational arena, is a direct consequence of 'New Labour's academy policy' which sought to 'graft legitimate forms of cultural capital' on 'others', in line with Tory Michael Gove's imposition of his very white 'celebratory imperialist history' (Kulz 2017, 16). One viable counter to this myopia suggests:

We have 'History Month' and it's because we have a diverse school. The school's stance is to celebrate everyone's history because, in effect, we have Black kids, we have Spanish, a large Portuguese proportion and it's a melting pot, this school. And staff have asked the Head teacher (Mrs Johnson), 'why don't we do Black History Month?' And she said, 'Well, you've got enough Black role models³ in this school and so forth.' (Mr Edison, teacher Southside College, 2018)

Mr Edison, states it is Mrs Johnson's awareness of this reality that is the driver behind her statement, 'you've got enough Black role models in this school and so forth', which means the children have a positive black presence they can apprehend and therefore identify with in school. Crucially, this demonstrates that this Headteacher, who is a black woman, endeavours to normalise the majority black presence in a way that embraces cultural and racial diversity in her school through the notion of 'role modelling' as a form of signification. For her then, perhaps there is no need to have a Black History Month (BHM) per se because the black students see themselves being positively represented. Yet it could also be the matter of a black Head of School deliberately not wanting to stand out in an overly white space, which is how 'the politics of signification can be in attempts to win people to particular ways of seeing the world' (Storey 2018, 4). For instance:

In induction day, when I came to this school, both me and my parents liked it because there are a lot of ethnic teachers in this school. And there are other schools, even today, that don't have as many ethnic teachers. And I feel like, for example, an ethnic child would more relate with an ethnic teacher than a white teacher. (David, student Southside College, 2018)

David speaks to how a positive reinforcement of his ethnicity as a black child was crucial to the choice of school, perhaps by recognising from the outset that diversity was central to the school's ethos 'to celebrate everyone's history'. Similarly,

³ I have worked with several organisations on 'Role Models' initiatives including the 'Reach Programme', '100 Black Men of London', Manhood Academy, 'New Initiatives Rites of Passage', The Black Police Association's BAME VOYAGE Programme and on the ex-Mayor Boris Johnson's '1000 Mentors' project 2011-2012.

the fact that they have 'History Month' during the month of October, which is the UK's BHM⁴, is telling for it enables students to perhaps equitably share in a type of learning that is not reduced to a myopic, 'revisionist "whitened" history' (Walker 2006; Akala 2018) of the world. For instance, when Gove was Secretary for Education in 2012, he attempted to remove 'Mary Seacole and Olaudah Equiano' from the National Curriculum and 'forty thousand petitioners objected' (Warner cited in Walker et al 2017, 5), which is why they are still being taught. Equally, this take on compulsory education has been likened to 'an act of cultural imperialism' and 'many teachers whose responsibility it is to teach "British values" feel uncomfortable doing so' (Bhopal 2018, 72). The suggestion is that there are teachers who recognise the dire, long term, consequences of exposing students to this revisionist history.

Failure to recognise these aspects of the learning experience in the context of BAME students, means an important aspect of their relationships with the system of compulsory education in the UK will remain hidden. Thus, to place a BAME teacher in front of students and expect a meaningful 'connection' is fanciful, yet in situations where this shared biography is drawn upon there are qualitative benefits to the overall learning experience. For instance, when the respondents were asked the following question, one answer stood out:

Henry: Do you believe having a teacher from a similar background etc, is important to the way you are educated in school?

Obviously a Black teacher would understand more than a white person would because they've probably gone through racism and all sorts of stuff when they were younger, so they would have a better understanding of how to teach us in a way that makes us feel that we're comfortable in the school. They're really quick to tell us who was King then and what that person made, but, like, there's a lot of things that Black people created and made and done that we don't really hear about in school but was very necessary to our present life. A lot of what I know about black history I never learned in school. (David, student Southside College, 2018)

Knowledge delivery and attitudes to learning, overall attainment, and achievement by students, for David, are affected by various factors that should be

⁴ Labour activist Linda Bellos, Head of the London Strategic Policy Unit, with her team sponsored the first BHM in Britain in October 1987' (Walker et al 2017:50).

given consideration in discussions of black students and 'educational ability'. David also demonstrates awareness of how intersectional relations where 'multiple interlocking identities delineated by sociocultural power and privilege' (Leal-Covey 2015, 39) come into play. By citing counter historical narratives that enable him to make sense of his school experience, through the affinity he feels with black teachers he supplements his own 'education', and is not reliant on Mrs Johnson's notion of 'you've got enough Black role models'. Moreover, these resistant young voices speak to how an exposure to black history can positively impact student and teacher relations in the classroom. Indeed, when this is not the case 'it's difficult for black children growing up because the things that are projected about black people on the whole are negative...you're supposed to be failing' (Cork 2005, 51). The suggestion that 'you're supposed to be failing' directly speaks to the consequences of 'low teacher expectations' that explains why many were/are the products of a formal education that does not encourage thinking away from Europe as the centre of the universe, intellectually or otherwise. Indeed:

The second that child acts in any way that's not following the school's expectations or rules, they're sort of guided towards, and almost informed that they're, going on this journey to this path of exclusion, which sets up a mindset for failure. I watch them with the mindset that's changing, that's now adapting, they almost get to a point where they give up on themselves and go: "Fuck it. I don't care. Do what you want with me." I don't believe in the values anymore because they are taught one set of things. It's a Eurocentric perspective. I'm like a little light that works with them one-to-one, and with their parents' one-to-one in the system. (Ms Myers 2018)

Ms Myers' consideration of what happens to the black child in that classroom situation where 'it's a Eurocentric perspective', speaks to encouraging students to strive for educational excellence within the constraints of this system, if not, they will continuously face the 'Fuck it. I don't care. Do what you want with me' attitude from their disenfranchised and disengaged black students. Ms Myers also uses 'empathetic certainty' as an ontological tool in her work with the students and their parents when suggesting 'I'm like a little light that works with them one-to-one', acknowledging the students' 'spiritual' needs in their quest for a more holistic sense of 'being'. Moreover, her perspective identifies the differences between 'schooling' as training and 'education' as that which engenders an ongoing and more complete understanding of

a society's dominant culture; socially, economically, spiritually, psychologically and politically. The suggestion here is:

I think it's a society thing. I think everything has to change including the curriculum...I also feel really sorry for teachers that are disempowered because they can't stretch themselves to teach creatively, because they are limited by what the Government says: "This is what the children need... and this is what they've got to have." (Ms Myers 2018)

Teachers like Ms Myers accept that they operate within a framework that often constrains and stymies the potential of their students, 'because they can't stretch themselves to teach creatively'. Further, she suggests that the constraints are curricular, and teachers are fearful of introducing anything that challenges the received wisdom in their schooling environment. Ms Myers knows the fault lies with Government policy that dictates what the children have 'got to have and need', that these are essentially formulaic and serve only to 'spellbind' most children. In Stephen's case as one 'who knows', his awareness of the 'external forces' (Gillborn and Youdell 2000) that dictate curricular content are demonstrated in the following:

Personally, when it comes to the schooling system, I believe that it's corrupt and selfish. The way that the system and the Government has made it, they put a specific thing: "you have to learn this, you have to learn that", and you don't really have a specific choice in what you want to learn. There are so many things about the world that we are not taught. And, common sense we pretty much learn that at home, and, even if you think about it, you spend more time at school than you even spend with your family. So, I feel like we're just indoctrinated into being taught what they want us to be taught. (Stephen, student Lakeside School, 2018)

Stephen speaks to being forcibly socialised into a classroom culture that is created by the teacher, during the pedagogic moment, that for him obscures the wider structural arrangements that determine what can and cannot be taught. Hence, the delivery of relatively poor or unconvincing curricular content and perceived bad classroom praxis become inextricably linked in the mind of the student. Consequently, the traditions and cultures that are produced, reproduced and therefore ever-present in schools often conflict, thereby creating an 'us and them', 'self and other' mentality that leads to various pressures that impact the ability to teach as well as to learn. Fundamentally then, we need to appreciate that the learning environment students often find themselves in is premised upon a form of knowledge and cultural production

that, as in the Stephen's case, can be alienating. Education, in relation to aspects of Government policy that guide curricular knowledge in a given direction for Stephen are 'selfish' and a form of 'indoctrination':

Because, in your head it's just a thing where no one is taking you into consideration specifically: "do this so it helps me." So, in that case, if I see that it's specifically, let's just say, for the Caucasian we're just going to be like: "Alright then, I'm not really too interested because it doesn't concern me, it's not to do with blacks. We're not in it so we don't care." It's just a thing where all of these things have a subconscious effect on you. It even gets to the point where you want to change who you are, so you can fit in. That's how uneven it is, but that's what I think, anyway. (Gbemisola, student Lakeside School, 2018)

Gbemisola recognises that in a system where knowledge of the world and almost everything in it is premised upon the 'Eurocentric white cultural values' (Shujaa 1994; Andrew 2018; Bhopal 2018) that undergird the racialised learning experience of black students, conscious choices have to be made. She knows it is evident that the 'Caucasian' is positively represented and readily apprehended in this society within and beyond the formal learning environment. Unsurprisingly then, for her 'all of these things have a subconscious effect on you', which somewhat explains the antipathy many black students display when a viable black presence in their school curriculum is not forthcoming. Mr Edison furthers this point when stating:

There is a large cohort of kids, these Black boys, who need to know their past and where they come from, and if they know that our culture is rich in heritage with regards to inventions and all those bits and pieces, there's a saying: 'once you know where you come from, you know where you are going.' And if they know they are from descendants of 4000 years of Kings and Queens and civilisations and stuff... But those are conversations I have outside because we are compelled to teach topics that are missing this black contribution. (Mr Edison 2018)

Mr Edison makes a crucial observation on why we need to tackle this revisionist history, for it is fine to promote this in the context of black children but there are other matters at stake here when speaking to the wider BAME learning experience. For instance, introducing more black staff and teaching more black history is pointless if BAME students, who do not regard themselves as black, still feel excluded. Commenting on this notion it was suggested:

I come from a Latin background. I've studied history for four years and except for the Cuban missile, I've never seen anything to do with Latin America or something different that's not black, Asian or white. Basically, it's very stereotypical. We just get taught the overall, so that when we sit in an exam, we can fill in the overall things that we think, but we're never actually given the opportunity to go in depth about something we actually believe. So, we're always just there, you know, persistent, just 'there'. (Julie, student Lakeside School, 2018)

Julie acknowledges that students who are not part of the dominant narrative are not taught about themselves historically as part of the schooling process, where it is taken for granted that they have not historically contributed anything to world civilisations and are 'just there'. Similarly, John (2006) regards the deleterious effect of a Government-led, 'whitewashed' approach to education as an 'anti-discrimination' issue that fails to consider 'human rights legislation' or 'effectively challenges the legacy of Britain's imperialist and colonial past' (2006, 1). This occurs because there are 'differentiated processes' (Shujaa 1994) that perpetuate particular values, ideals, attitudes and beliefs that are Eurocentric in nature and ethnocentric /white in principle. Hence,

Those who control the state schooling systems in Britain and the United States are not about to alter the misinformation inculcated through their schools. Schooling of this kind is needed to reinforce the cultural values and beliefs that maintain the existing power relations. (Dove 1994, 344)

Teachers, parents/guardians/carers and students need to appreciate the profundity of this form of 'misinformation inculcated through their schools' that acts as a form of 'social programming, where whiteness is valued, and blackness is not' (Henry 2007). Equally, understanding that this represents a 'learning' environment where 'teachers and students try to live within and negotiate rigid boundaries' (Kultz 2017, 17) is of relevance here. For, any discussion on the qualitative educational and schooling experiences of black students must factor in, according to Dove (1994), 'the existing power relations.' These 'power relations' are aspects of the ideological basis and material realities that become normalised within the learning environment, to the detriment of many BAME students who cannot relate to what, or even how, they are being taught. Moreover, 'this is an issue in HE too, but it is beginning to be challenged

by the BAME student body, i.e. “Why is my curriculum white?”⁵ If schools tackled this earlier, then perhaps university students would not need to be involved in this ‘fight’ (Madar 2018). To further explore the idea that this issue should be ‘tackled in schools’, as Madar suggests, I will now focus on the pros and cons of having a designated BHM, where the expectation of teaching a more inclusive history is reduced to one month of the year.

Black History and The National Curriculum: thinking beyond one month

Black History Month, or ‘History Month’ in the case of Southside College, is an occasion when students are invited to share their personal narratives or alternative sources of historical information. In this way they introduce their peers to aspects of their histories and cultures that are not presently taught in the National Curriculum. Moreover, whether one agrees or disagrees with the notion of apportioning a ‘special month’ to correct an obvious curricular and historical imbalance, the fact is that students and teachers are encouraged to share knowledge and experiences during this period. Yet, for many, this sharing of knowledge is in and of itself highly problematic and regarded by some as ‘peripheral interjections that are ephemeral and will not be valued or utilised after the month has ended’ (Herbert Ekwe Ekwe ‘personal communication’, 2015). In fact, not having this opportunity to share alternative sources of knowledge for even one month in the year is overly contentious, more so when we consider the impact of ‘low teacher expectations’ (Coard 1991; Sewell 1997) on black attitudes to learning. In fact, in October 2018 there was much consternation in the black communities over a ‘shameful rebranding’ when thirty local councils changed BHM to ‘Diversity Month’.⁶ Thus, to shed light on the ongoing arguments around the viability of BHM consider the following exchange:

⁵ For more information and further insight see: <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/articles/why-is-my-curriculum-white-decolonising-the-academy>. Similarly students occupied the old Deptford Town Hall, which is now a teaching space at Goldsmiths, University of London from March – July 2019 (137 days in total), in protest at the ongoing racist treatment of the 40-45% BAME student population. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/mar/20/students-occupy-goldsmiths-in-protest-at-institutional-racism>

⁶ See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/30/councils-condemned-for-shameful-rebranding-of-black-history-month> for a discussion on this renaming.

Henry: Do you have specific examples of good practice in school that challenge stereotypically low or high expectations of you as students who aren't white?

Momentary silence where the students looked at each other, then at their teacher and then back at me.

Henry: The obvious one would be Black History Month.

Ms Myers: Do we have Black History Month here?

Students collectively: No.

Henry: So, what do you do? Do you have teachers who introduce you to aspects of black history? Or, you don't?

Once again there was a momentary silence where the students looked at each other, then at their teacher, and then back at me.

Henry: So, what do you learn? Just the straight curriculum?

Ravi: Just the same routine, every day... Unless you find an actual down-to-earth teacher, then you can talk about it with them, but besides that, no-one's really interested.

Henry: Why don't they have Black History Month?

Ms Myers: That's a very good question, Henry. I don't know. When I started working here, we had a black Head Teacher and she didn't initiate any work around Black History. It's been a bone of contention.

Henry: How long ago was that?

Ms Myers: Last year, she left last year.

Henry: I think I remember something about that. I think it had something to do with me coming in here to work with some of the young people a while ago. It's vague.

Ms Myers: {Laughs} I was the teacher who got you into the school in 2008 to deliver a programme during BHM with a cohort of BAME students. At the time we discussed the reluctance of the Headteacher to officially recognise the month.

Henry: That's quite interesting because I've actually heard a few examples of where black Head Teachers are resistant to it. On one hand, I understand why,

because what they're basically saying is, "You're only giving them a month." But, on the other hand, there should be something to create some kind of a balance. So, do you think that's a problem?

Ravi: Maybe.

Ms Myers: Can I ask, is that true of your experience? As an Asian girl, do you feel represented in your culture through the curriculum?

Ravi: No, not really because the only ethnicities that they shed light on are what Britain wants British children to learn. Like, I didn't even know how my country was made until...

Henry: So, you're from?

Ravi: Bangladesh. I didn't know that it was part of Pakistan and India before that. My dad told me this happened...

Henry: In 1971 I believe.

Ravi: Yeah, I didn't know that. And, the only time the school brought it up was when they were talking about how the British Empire colonised India. That was the only time I heard of it, and they were talking about how they forced Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis to take part in the war, and that was it.

Ravi's thoughts are insightful as the focus is usually on the lack of a meaningful black historical presence, especially during BHM where the emphasis is on African Caribbean cultures, but for her, as an Asian student, her ethnicity is also rendered invisible within the National Curriculum. Of equal importance is the fact that her father taught her 'how her country was made' and the involvement of the British in its creation. As such, a comprehension of the machinations that impact the way we learn about self and other, as discrete ethnic groups within a collective racialised experience, is crucial to the future 'education of all students' (Coard 1971; Richardson 2005). That is why the momentary silences 'spoke' volumes, as the students were in the presence of one of the few teachers in the school who regularly provides a space for discussions on black history, race and ethnicity within and beyond the confines of the classroom. On this matter it was further suggested:

To be honest, there's not much teaching about our ethnicity in school. Unless your parents were not born in this country, you can't even go to your parents and ask because, if anything, they wouldn't know themselves. So, it's only like your great-grand-parents, or your grand-parents, that you can go to, to ask

about where you're from. Like, for me, I can go to my granddad and ask him about what was happening in Jamaica, why he left. And from my nan, I can ask what happened in Dominica. But, to be honest, I've never actually asked my mum, and that, because I doubt they'll know. (Jason 2018)

Jason and Ravi speak to the positive impact of extra-curricular involvement on their wider 'education' that enables them to have a historical memory of self in line with Garvey's statement that 'many are educated beyond the four walls of the classroom' (Martin 2006). For them, 'going back', Sankofa⁷ like, to get an understanding of their ethnicity is crucial to being able to locate themselves as something other than merely being known as black or Asian British. Moreover, both speak to the need for children to experience a form of teaching where the learning locates their personal biographies, historically, as part of the National Curriculum which they know their parents never received. Their suggestions speak to the ongoing need for supplementary schooling or 'subaltern counter publics' (Mirtza and Reay 2000), which Dove suggests can be traced to the 'early sixties' and 'the establishment of these schools is a representation of African resistance to racism' (1994, 343).

The fact that Jason candidly shares that he can ask his grandparents about what happened in Jamaica and Dominica, but is reluctant to ask his 'mum and that, because I doubt they'll know', is telling. Jason is obviously considering his relationship with being black and British born, like his mum, whilst trying to figure out why he cannot seek a black perspective from her. This was not the case with Ravi as her father explained aspects of her Bangladeshi history that he believed it was important for her to know. However, one possible explanation for this 'lack of knowledge' on Jason's parent's part, sits well with my argument here and that is 'we mislead others and confuse ourselves by seeking to provide a 'black perspective' on matters that transcend systemic racism, according to John (2006). Here he speaks to the idea that black people 'know and have all the answers', yet the ideological systems do not just exclude blacks from the dominant narrative, 'those structures oppress others within the institution' (2006, 94). In the context of being a black child of his mother's generation, there is also a sense of shame that must be factored in when it comes to what you 'should' know about black history regardless of which post Windrush

⁷ Sankofa is an image of a bird with an egg in its mouth, walking forwards, whilst looking behind. In the Ghanaian language Twi, Sankofa is a proverb that basically means 'go back and fetch it', or 'it's not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten', which is very apt in this instance.

Generation you belong to. The point is that without awareness that ‘the education system has always been centred on a dominant White Eurocentric curriculum which has often omitted the contribution of Black and ethnic minorities historically’, (Arday 2020, 5), individuals will often, wrongly, take ownership of this perceived ‘lack of knowledge’.

To further this point, in 2008 the ‘Transatlantic Slave Trade’ was to be included in the National Curriculum’ and former schoolteacher and community educator Paul Obinna (2007) forewarned that. ‘for far too many students this will represent the sum total of African/black history’. For him, this confuses the students by encouraging them to accept as ‘truth’ the negative association of the inferior African/black other, who has contributed nothing to ‘the storehouse of human knowledge’ (Shujaa 1994), whilst accepting a European positive self that is reaffirmed as a natural aspect of everyday life. Further, Obinna posits on the National Curriculum:

Under the Aims it suggests that: “If schools are to respond effectively to these values and purposes, they need to work in collaboration with families and the local community, including church and voluntary groups, local agencies and business, in seeking to achieve two broad aims through the curriculum.” These aims provide an essential context within which schools develop their own curriculum and introduce a more meaningful black presence into their children’s world view. You just need to place educators who ‘get it’ in front of them and you will see an immediate change in their attitudes. (Obinna 2007)

The suggestion is that the introduction of a ‘meaningful black presence’ will ‘raise Black students’ self-esteem’, which seems like a viable counter to classroom antipathy and is doable in at least two very practical ways. The first, as stated above by Obinna, is to recognise that ‘Britain has entered not a post-racial field but a field in which education and social policy discourses have largely been de-racialised’ (Warmington et al 2018, 423). The second is simple and concerns the employment of BAME teachers and/or community educators who ‘get it’. These are individuals who run or assist in teaching etc. in supplementary and Saturday schools within the local community and, therefore, have intimate knowledge that can be utilised as a resource. The suggestion is that these ‘alternative’ spaces are vital to ensuring a more holistic form of pedagogic practice (Dove 1994; Mirtza and Reay 2000), where the overall learning of these young individuals transcends the mere inclusion of staff from a BAME background. Moreover, by emphasising the role of ‘community groups’, Obinna flags

up the crucial role they play in bridging the divide between ‘formal’, in school, and ‘informal’, within the community, ways of teaching BAME students. Doing so will somewhat address the social imbalances that are a consequence of educational ‘underachievement’, as ‘modern liberal education wishes to suture and save a public culture that is racially exclusionary [and] complicit in committing epistemic injustice’ (Shilliam 2016 cited in Thomas 2018, 4). Thus, after discussing this idea of being ‘complicit’, thereby perpetuating ‘epistemic injustice’ through a sense of shame, Mr Edison stated:

I mean, when you looked at those aspects, and some of the young men were talking about that, those are the conversations I have outside because it’s like they’re ashamed of talking about slavery and that’s wrong. That’s the hidden curriculum that I enforce as a Peer Mentor, so that’s when I take them aside, because it’s not the National Curriculum.

Unsurprisingly then, for teachers like Mr Edison, there is a requirement to ensure that children are grounded in a proud history and culture that raises aspirations and promotes self-esteem, to counter the ‘epistemic injustice’ embedded within the National Curriculum. As such, a failure to take perspectives into consideration that proffer insight and explanation into certain resistant attitudes to learning by BAME students, as evidenced in Mr Edison’s statement, means many teachers far too often read such behaviour as unfounded and unjustified forms of abstention from learning. This occurs because the role of whiteness as an ‘ever-present non-presence that moulds and shapes a lived reality’ (Henry 2007, 39), which bestows “gifts”, “benefits” and “privileges” upon white people that have to be “earned” in one way or another, by black people (McIntosh 1989), is seldom acknowledged, because:

Education is a space in which the norms of whiteness are reinforced and reproduced. Outsiders who do not identify with these norms (‘British values’) are seen as a threat. The school space is used to maintain and privilege whiteness at the same time as asserting its dominance over black and minority ethnic groups. Whiteness works to perpetuate and reinforce racial superiority. (Bhopal 2018, 85)

Bhopal suggests that a failure to recognise that cultural/racial ‘outsiders’ are seen as a threat to ‘British values’ undermines a meaningful discussion about staff and student relations. Consequently, forms of BAME classroom abstention often present as forms of ‘non-conformist behaviour’ (Majors 2003; Sewell 2009; Byfield 2008;

Graham 2017) that leads to the 'development of an oppositional cultural identity' (Ogbu 1992) within the learning space. That which Julie suggested above can only partially explain these cultures of abstention as 'we're always just there, you know, persistent, just there'. On this very point it was stated:

I've been doing history for long, and I'm not really sure about what they're teaching now, but, as long as I've been in there, all I know is that to do with race the main topic was the slave trade, and that's not really a positive about what happened. It is about how they became free and everything now, but the main topic was how they were getting beaten and everything else and, except for Black History Month, we don't get to learn about our people's success, like Martin Luther King and all the others. We only learn about the slave trade, like they got beaten, they got forced to work under the white masters, and they roamed free. But that's all we get to learn. We don't learn about any of the others that made a difference in the world. (Sasha, student Lakeside School 2018)

Sasha's insight is crucial here as the emphasis on the 'slave trade', as 'black history' was factored into the National Curriculum in September 2008, as mentioned above, and at the time I suggested this would be problematic because students who are exposed to this form of revisionist history will no doubt experience a heightened sense of shame. Consequently, during that historical moment many black educators, myself included, delivered numerous talks for students, and preparatory workshops for teachers in various schools and colleges. These talks took place in several London and regional boroughs, with a focus on dealing with the sense of shame that can be experienced when teaching about African Chattel Enslavement. In fact, it is not uncommon to witness black children visibly sink into their seats at the beginning of a talk on 'slavery', because they think this sense of shame will be reinforced in what they will be exposed to. This was the point Sasha made above regarding all they were taught about slavery was 'beatings' and then they could 'roam free' and I deal with this actuality every time I deliver such talks, especially during BHM. Hence, for Sasha to state, 'we don't learn about any of the others that made a difference in the world', readily increases this sense of shame; that which leads to disenfranchisement and fuels the forms of disengagement and antipathy we addressed earlier.

The omission of the histories of the racialised others is highly problematic and 'the absence of a liberated, diverse curriculum presents an avenue for education to be misappropriated as a "hegemonic device", thus stagnating student success' (Thomas

2018, 15). This means educators must also be willing and able to have both the empathy and consistency in their approach to teaching and must be 'sensitive to the potentially (re)traumatising affects upon children of African descent when teaching an aspect of history fraught with mistreatment and dehumanisation' (Obinna 2019). This is the professional demand of what Perkins (1986) describes as being a 'Social Advocate'; a teacher who will 'face any challenges to provide (Black) children with as high a quality education as possible by any means necessary' (Obinna 2019).

The notion of the 'Social Advocate' is important as Perkins sees the role of the teacher as partly responsible for the 'quality education' all children deserve, where they will be presented with a picture that they can positively self-reflect upon beyond a designated month or the school curriculum. Moreover, when tackling classroom dynamics, pedagogic practice, and antipathy the teacher needs to be aware of how their situatedness as the deliverer of what constitutes Eurocentric knowledge can represent a 'hegemonic device' that reinforces the status-quo. Therefore, students and educators who have awareness of the above relationship between cultural production and cultural reproduction in schools, are seldom able to challenge it because they are constrained by the boundaries of what Freire (1972) called the 'banking model of education'. This ensures the perpetuation of a system which, Robinson⁸ argues educates children 'in batches' according to 'their year of manufacture' and the National Curriculum, therefore, 'naturally' stifles creativity and 'divergent thinking'. This is the 'banking' concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits' (Freire 1972, 58). In addition to Freire's observation is the fact that in Britain, children do not receive anything of note in the National Curriculum about a thinking African/black historical self that is positive, uplifting and 'predates the period of chattel enslavement' (Walker 2006; Obinna 2007; Henry 2006, 2015).

⁸ See Robinson, K. (2010) 'Changing Education Paradigms' RSA Animate, <https://www.thersa.org/discover/videos/rsa-animate/2010/10/rsa>

Conclusion

The argument presented here has addressed some of the innermost concerns of BAME students, teachers and others who are stakeholders in the futures of children in the British educational system. That is why the reflections and suggestions of students and educators must remain at the forefront in any discussion of racial inequity in the National Curriculum, because they are in the firing line and bear the brunt of the deleterious effects of not being present in what you are expected to learn or teach. If this is not the case then, as stated above, the gross disparities in educational outcomes for BAME students will remain constant, almost fifty years after Coard's seminal intervention. The suggestion is that emphasis needs to be placed on the role that whiteness and the perpetuation of 'British values' plays in the negative attitudes to learning of many BAME students, so changes are needed at policy level to move the discussion of black history beyond one month in the year. Doing so will open up qualitative debate and discussion on the importance of having a positive presence in their teaching and learning environments. That is why, although BHM has its obvious shortcomings, it nevertheless opens a space for a different type of discussion regarding what constitutes valuable knowledge in the overall learning experience.

The notion of 'social advocacy' speaks to the seminal role that teachers, who are aware of curricular constraints and the psychological harm that can be done by not challenging them, can play an intersubjective role in the holistic teaching of BAME students. As such, provision should be made for a more diverse and inclusive method of teaching that counters the form of schooling that presents itself as being meritocratic yet fails to consider 'ecological' factors that explain how the excluded 'other' became a 'minority group' (Ogbu 2008). Indeed, teachers who are oblivious to this racialised experience and the profound effect it can have on BAME students' passion for learning, will have an inapposite view of the specific values and therefore expectations of those students. Consequently, it is crucial that educators draw on the experiences of those at the interface between theory and praxis, to create an environment that is conducive to mutual growth and a quality learning experience for all students across the education sector.

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