Does teaching racial justice and equity have a place in our schools?

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Abstract: *Schools are a microcosm of society and often tasked with fixing society's ills. We need to explore the purpose of education and the place of educators to not only prepare young people to gain the best qualifications they can, but also to challenge ourselves as educators and our young charges to be active citizens that will have enough knowledge about society and citizenship to shape tomorrow's world. Recent world events have given educators a push towards addressing issues around racial justice and equity. Although this shift is rife with complexity, some schools and groups are actively addressing the issues with students in practical and powerful ways.*

A country's school system can be considered a microcosm of the society it serves, and local schools are often the hub for community life. Certainly, over the past decade, Britain's state schools have been asked to address many more of society's most complex needs than ever before, and the demand to do this comes on top of their already-bulging agendas. The crisis associated with the Coronavirus pandemic over the past 12 months has altered the way schools now teach and how they engage with the wider school community. It has suddenly focused a more harsh spotlight on the increasing divisions between the haves and the have-nots, and associated outcomes for children and their families. This includes academic achievement at school and beyond, as well as health, employment and life-expectancy in the face of a global pandemic. Stark divisions, entrenched during prolonged austerity, have become even more acute in the face of national lockdown measures, forcing many families into precarity they never imagined would touch them, and pushing the already vulnerable deeper into poverty, a situation which seems more fitting for [Victorian England, and not 2021](#).

We have seen schools step up to the challenge without hesitation, sourcing food parcels for the families they serve, reinventing teaching through online lessons, providing devices and internet access for those that need it, producing work packs for home delivery where technology just isn't going to be an option, rallying round and making sure that everyone is okay, learning, and still connected in one way or another to the school community. Against the backdrop of so much activity, care, and action, the gross injustices of racial discrimination suddenly reared into focus when the brutal murder of [George Floyd](#) at the hands of police in the USA resonated with so many people worldwide: a sign that enough is enough.

The grassroots organisation for Black, Asian and Minority ethnic educators, [The BAMEed Network](#), has been working with schools throughout the pandemic to ensure that the needs of staff from Black and Asian backgrounds in particular, have been adequately taken into account through producing a [risk assessment and guidance document](#) specifically for these staff members. Although statistically, [Black and Asian colleagues are at higher risk of illness and death from Covid-19](#), nothing had been produced to safeguard them as frontline workers in schools, in the way that the NHS had accounted for their staff members' needs as key workers.

Still today, there is no mandatory vaccination programme for teachers as there is for frontline health workers. We were glad to be able to close this gap as schools returned from the first lockdown, and produced the guidance for schools ourselves at the BAMEed Network in a timely manner. Part of the guidance document's purpose was to support schools to do more to see the needs of their staff members that are from Black and Asian heritage, and to start a conversation with them more widely about their experience of class, race, and discrimination within our schools, workplaces and society as a whole. The focus on racial justice by the Black Lives Matter movement in the wake of George Floyd's murder has made this conversation even more relevant and important - and for many it has helped bring a new lexicon and an emerging understanding of issues about which they had been largely oblivious.

Adult life needs critical thinkers

It is one thing to consider the importance of racial and social justice in relation to the workplace conditions of adults in our education system, but how do we ensure that this extends beyond ticking boxes of the legal duties of the Equality Act and takes the form of meaningful change over time? Where do we start in our work to ensure that we all improve our awareness and education on these important matters? When is it the right time to start to learn about racial and social justice? One thing that has come to light as a result of the focus on inequities and structural racism endured by Black people and other minoritised people of colour, is that our education system has somehow simultaneously been seeing itself as a great equaliser, while perpetuating structural inequalities through its own practice. Part of the cause for this is the focus on quantifiable, measurable outcomes which take precedence over the more intangible and yet vital 'soft' skills of critical thinking, empathy, a sense of collective social responsibility. Employers say that these are the skills they most seek in their staff. For example in 2016, The World Economic Forum report on the future of jobs found that advertised job postings requiring the skill had doubled since 2009. So while we focus on the worthy aim of pushing young people through tests so that they gain the qualifications they need to open the next door for them, the emphasis has been on retaining the knowledge needed to pass the test, rather than on skills like critical thinking, active listening and collaboration which will stand them in good stead in adult life. This relates to the later point I will make around the core purpose of education, but Paulo Freire's work is a good place to start to learn more about education as a form of liberation (Friere, 1972), and the ability to think critically for both teachers and their young charges is vital here.

It was interesting to see the surge of emotion and the subsequent urgency to take action that ensued from the George Floyd incident and which emanated from the education sector. The BAMEed Network inbox has been inundated with requests for support from every level, be that CEOs of major education organisations, leaders of teacher unions, senior staff at local education authorities, multi-academy trusts or diocesan boards of education, as well as from headteachers and leaders from individual schools, and individuals from within the junior ranks of school staff, or parents, governors and even young people themselves. Across the board, people are looking for answers and seem ready and willing to take steps to ensure that their own practice is inclusive and actively anti-racist.

The question of race and racism in education

Questions of race, racism and teaching are not new and have been debated for decades. One obvious site for anti-racist practice is the curriculum. The MacPherson Report, published 6 years after the racially motivated murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993, strongly suggested that inclusivity and diversity in the curriculum can improve social cohesion, prevent racist attitudes taking hold and instill the value of cultural diversity from an early age in young people. Improvement in the content of the curriculum is vital for many reasons, not least to provide a balanced view of history. People from a variety of backgrounds have lived side by side in Britain as the result of migrations from far and wide since the middle ages (See Our Migration Story website ourmigrationstory.org.uk), as well as more recent migrations as a result of our colonial past, or as a consequence of the displacement of peoples connected with our involvement in wars in more recent times. It is of note that hundreds of schools across the country have now signed up to teach the Diverse Curriculum – the Black Contribution, developed by colleagues at Hackney Council. This curriculum came about in part thanks to home learning giving parents and carers a window into what children were learning, and more importantly what they weren't learning, and which led them to press their education authority to do more to ensure that an integral part of our heritage as a nation is represented. It provides pupils aged five to 14 with nine weeks of lessons on subjects including the Windrush generation, activism, British identity, and diversity in the arts and science. Similarly, another organisation, The Black Curriculum, has partnered with Camden local education authority and an MP in Manchester to diversify the curriculum in around 1,000 schools. One of the major factors cited in opposition to teaching a more diverse curriculum is a lack of time, or worry about what is left out, if other things are included. But this is just a distraction from more fundamental reasons concerning teachers' own knowledge and confidence about the diversity of our cultural heritage as a nation. For too long the messages around multiculturalism have actually served to blur this rich picture. Another related factor, is that because teaching Black history is not mandatory and is seen as a choice, or a one-month-a-year event, it creates the notion that Black history isn't as important as other aspects of history. Black history is British history, and this needs to be seen as fact.

Looking beyond formally taught subject matter, discrimination in education is also enacted through disciplinary practice. For the decades since the MacPherson report recommendation to do so, schools have been dutifully recording racist incidents, monitoring the numbers and self-defined ethnic identity of excluded pupils, and these are published annually on a school-by-school basis. There are a range of practices which underpin Black students' exclusion and which impact on their educational attainment for example, which are starkly detailed in the DfE Timpson Report on school exclusion of May 2019 and which result in Black British children of Caribbean heritage being more than 1.7 times more likely to be permanently excluded as compared with their white British counterparts.

What seems to have shifted, and has potentially divided educators along the way more recently, is the notion of institutional and structural racism as inherent in every element of society and not least, school life, and which runs like the lettering through a stick of rock throughout our

practice. We need to make particular efforts to seek it out and adjust what we do, accordingly. At the end of the academic year of 2019-20, two major Charter School chains in the USA, Uncommon Schools and KIPP, denounced their own use of 'carceral' or 'no excuses' discipline techniques as racist. These were practices that had been the cornerstones of their educational philosophy. These techniques have been much lauded by a number of schools in England, and these schools have not subsequently re-evaluated their position, adamant that any less of an iron grip on children's bodies, gaze and mouths will result in destruction of their lives as disadvantaged young people. The interesting thing is that both camps in this schism around discipline believe that they are acting in the best interests of the young people from disadvantaged backgrounds whom they serve. However, what is clear from one perspective is that it is about ensuring young people get the grades. Such a stance can come at a cost, and can set young people onto educational pathways for the future sometimes unskilled at questioning, disrupting and without proficiency at much else aside from passing tests. Students, and their teachers, need to be equipped to see and address the socio-political causes for the disadvantage, inequity and the structural discrimination which creates such deep divisions in society in the first place. They should be questioning why the the gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students has stopped closing.

Some organisations have opted out of sustaining the push for changes to curriculum, pedagogy and policies around 'behaviour' and so on. After public statements of intent were posted on websites, or circulated by letters home to parents, some driven by guilt or alarm, and others by an emerging or enduring understanding of racism, it is now clear which organisations are willing and able to see that structural racism needs to be dismantled at every level, and which organisations have retreated to tinkering around the edges, at most perhaps creating some better optics while remembering some more pressing issues they might focus on right now. And there are many pressing issues for the education sector right now.

The fine line between enacting policy and unlawfulness

Looking at whether a sharper focus on racial justice in the form of anti-racist practice should be enacted in schools or not is one heck of a question. There are a growing number of programmes, awards, charter marks, organisations, formal change management structures and guide books which are emerging that can support schools to map their pathway to dismantling structural racism in their curriculum, employment and staff development policies and practices, discipline, hair and uniform policies, and in supporting teachers' professional understanding and practice in the classroom and beyond. Alongside these developments, however, there seems to be growing pressure on schools not to disrupt the status quo. Some educators have picked up on what appear to be sinister suggestions that to do so may be to step over a fine line between enacting the Equality Act and breaking the law for standing up for equality, as many witnessed during the time of Section 28 only 30 years ago. At the start of the academic year 2020-21, new DfE guidance on the teaching of relationships, sex and health education has become the site of specific instruction to schools about the potentially extreme political stances held by those very organisations which produce the resources, and the external agencies they seek support from, to deliver in this statutory curriculum area. In this document, such extreme stances include: "divisive or victim narratives" and "selecting and presenting information to make unsubstantiated

accusations against state institutions". Around the same time that this guidance was published, a letter to headteachers and SLT was circulated by a new organisation which sees itself standing up against anti-racist discourse, and specifically against Critical Race Theory. Don't Divide Us sees this discourse as divisive, rife with so-called victim narrative and potentially illegal, supposedly going against the 1996 Education Act and Teachers' Standards which state the need for teachers to maintain political neutrality. By shifting the focus in this way, the anti-racism narrative stops being seen as to do with creating greater race equity, and instead is construed as anti-white sentiment, or is seen as an expression of political leanings rather than a desire to understand the historical and societal causes of inequalities which have played out over generations in terms of educational progression, health outcomes and life-expectancy for Black and Asian British citizens. This group advises teachers that to regard the acceptance of structural racism as fact, to challenge inherent bias, or to have any association with Black Lives Matter is politically motivated and therefore should be viewed as indoctrination. In their view, discussion of anti-racism will make teachers, children and their families feel guilt, and that actively seeing race is a way to divide us.

The core purpose of education

When considering whether teaching racial justice and equity has a place in our schools, we need to think carefully about the core purpose of education. For the proponents of the no excuses (or, in the UK, of zero tolerance) education and the charter schools movement, it has been about moving children through the testing process with as much skill and knowledge as is necessary to ensure that they compete with their more privileged peers and reach the next stage of their education with comparable test scores. Until these tests explicitly contain questions about racial justice and equity, there is no place to learn about such things. Our testing system in itself is inherently flawed as it requires one third of children to fail for the two thirds to succeed. In the words of Daniel Koretz in The Testing Charade, *"When test scores become the goal of the teaching process, they both lose their value as indicators of educational status and distort the educational process in undesirable ways. That is exactly what happened when high stakes testing became the core of education 'reform'"* (Koretz, D, 2017, p39)

In modern complex society such as ours, we need to be able to give children something that will serve them as powerful adults with agency in their own right. Learning is as much about agency as it is about knowledge retrieval, and there is a strong body of evidence (for example, Carini, Kuh & Klein, 2006) to suggest that the work that schools do now to prepare their students for the 21st century should include a consistent and high quality focus on knowledge and understanding, skills and attitudes. Gert Biesta's work suggests that what we do in the classroom can make the biggest difference to children while they're in our schools and the way in which we guide them to 'meet the world' will serve them now and beyond their schooling. We need to connect education to our core purpose, which cannot simply rest on passing tests.

There are several good examples of schools serving the same kinds of underprivileged cohorts as those which may receive zero tolerance, and be given rote-based learning in some circumstances, and yet which deploy an entirely different framework for learning and discipline. School 21 in Newham for example, is an all-through school which educates the 'head, heart and

hand', seeing the aim of school to educate for knowledge, values and attitudes and also manual skilled tasks such as craft and handiwork. Inherent in their curriculum will be what they call 'Real World Learning' about social justice, and developing the critical skills to know, think and to talk coherently about history, politics, societal structures, inequalities and more. In partnership with organisations such as the Justice Department and the Metropolitan Police, students are engaged in answering complex questions such as 'With the continual restrictions on legal aid, how can we ensure wide-ranging and fair access to justice?' and 'Does the Met Police effectively engage with young people and what could we do differently?'

At primary level, Inspire Partnership Trust serves disadvantaged areas Greenwich, Medway and Croydon. Their curriculum structures itself around similar lines to School 21 with a focus on the inter-related and co-dependent components of the cognitive (head), affective (heart) and psychomotor (hand) domains of learning. Academic engagement is rooted in relationships, and is about students' own commitment to being a learner. Social engagement is about being an active participant in school life and intellectual engagement in the learning process. The Inspire Partnership Trust curriculum framework is rooted in core texts which have been carefully selected to be contemporary enough to allow pupils to engage deeply and critically with a range of complex issues, linking to an outcome which has a social justice element and supports children to make sense of a modern complex society with strong and robust knowledge which will help them develop the skills they need to navigate some of the challenges they will encounter in life.

For both these examples, the process of learning is what makes the outcome strong and there is absolutely a place to give the children access to the knowledge they need to understand the past and the present, and to imagine a more just and equitable future which they will be active agents in creating. In this way, providing children with ways to make sense of themselves as learners, and a focus on themselves as meeting the world but not being the centre of the world, gives them and their teachers the opportunities to be trusted to explore complex societal problems such as inequity, race and racism, gender, climate change and more. Schools like these should, and absolutely do, see themselves as equipped for and adept at teaching racial justice and equity, without fear of straying from their core purpose. In the words of Paulo Friere, "Education is a political act. No pedagogy is neutral... Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world and with each other" (Freire, 1970, p. 72). And so it stands that while racial injustice and inequity exist in the world, so must learning to dismantle them exist in the education of both teacher and student.

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