

**SOLUTIONS FOR ENDING
INTERGENERATIONAL 'EDUCATIONAL
POVERTY'**

**THE PRECURSOR TO LIFELONG
ECONOMIC OPPRESSION IN ALL ITS
FORMS**

BY MICHELLE HOLMES



Radical Methodologies for Correcting Educational Outcomes in Working Class African & African Caribbean Students

Centre of Pan African Thought
86-90 Paul Street, London
EC4 8HZ
UK

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, or stored in any retrieval system of any nature, without the prior, express written permission from the Centre of Pan African Thought

Within the UK, exceptions are allowed in respect of any fair dealing for the purpose of research of private study, or criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyrights, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Enquiries concerning reproducing outside these terms and in other countries should be sent to our Editor in chief, please contact editor@panafricanthought.com

The Centre of Pan African Thought is an independent learning and research institute in London, UK. We publish cutting edge scholarship, analysis and research, written by respected academics, authors and community leaders. To learn more about The Centre please go to panafricanthought.com

Solutions for ending intergenerational ‘Educational Poverty’, the precursor to lifelong economic oppression in all its forms.

By Michelle Holmes

London, United Kingdom
12th December 2018

“For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change” – Audre Lorde

Keywords: race, racism, education and trauma

1. Introduction

Asking for solutions not only means a problem has presented or manifested itself, but also that a root cause remains untreated. In Britain, there appears to be an open secret that to be highly educated is a privilege reserved for the elite; and the statistics would back up this notion. At our top universities, Oxford and Cambridge, Black or Black British Caribbean students constituted 0.2% of the student population in 2007-08. Seven times fewer Black or Black British Caribbean's than on average at other universities. At the Russell Group universities, comprising 20 major UK research-intensive universities, where graduates are expected to shape the future of British industry and public life; African Caribbean or Black British students are disproportionately under represented at most of these institutions. The exceptions were King's College and the University of Birmingham (Proportion of Students from Ethnic Minorities studying at Russell Group Universities (2007-08), but if we concur that universities are the life blood of our future economy, nurturing the talent required to develop this country deep into the 21st century, the evidence for whom higher education is and isn't working for is stark.

This paper seeks to empirically determine whom education is really meant for and what must be done to unpick the deeply embedded racist structures of the institution. It will argue how racism in the curriculum and teaching profession create structural inequalities. It will address the psychological impact that race and identity have on the mental and emotional health of students and teachers of African and African Caribbean heritage, while proposing ways in which we can effectively address this.

2. Pedagogy of Race, Empire and National Identity

The ideology of race and racial hierarchy has shaped and continues to shape educational practice in Britain, and the education system is a tool for both empowerment and oppression. Although what defines racial groups is a nuanced and subjective theory, a challenge in itself. One must first understand how displacement, colonialism and how its social and mental conditioning has impacted the Black British sense of identity, self-esteem, belonging and cultural placement plays a part. Its impact is clear to this day, even if its implications are not.

In Aug 2005, a study called "Race to Ethnicity: The classification of African identity in Britain" - The Ligali Organisation makes an interesting comment on racial categorising. Asserting that "the existing classification framework has no means of differentiating between African Britons with West African, East African, South African or Caribbean heritage." This posed an important theory, that whilst the concept of identity remains fluid for most African people, primarily informed by the ancestral and heritage information passed down from parents; the formatting of a single hegemonic national identity imposed through state education (on Black children) and media is problematic. This homogenising of student's identity, gathering and lumping all Africans into a single basket case is flawed. Students of differing African backgrounds are essentially made culturally invisible by the system. If we look at the primary education sector, that invisibility is present also, where the lack of equality and representation at the staffing level and in the curriculum reaffirms this lack of identity.

In primary schools, where we have the highest concentration of ethnic minority students, with 1.09 million (30.4%) BAME pupils - just 12,100 out of 208,000 (6%) of Local Authority (LA) maintained primary teachers were from BAME backgrounds.

Compounding this issue is the disparities in leadership, where the ratio of BME's in teaching roles compared to senior head or deputy head positions is just 435 out of 14,500 (3%) of LA maintained primary school heads. There is similar underrepresentation in primary academies where 46 out of 1,300 heads (3.6%) were from "ethnic minorities" in 2015. (Regional BAME Representation in Schools DfE Census Data 2015). Not only does this evidence the lack of diversity in teaching staff but also those in senior leadership and management positions, even though primary schools have the highest concentration of ethnic minority students. This demonstrates how the education system perpetuates invisibility, carried out through subtle and overt forms of oppression and subjugation, in this case, by the lack of equal representation along the ethnic landscape of British society. Giving evidence for the report, one black secondary school teacher said, "If the children see SMT [the senior management team] as being all white and the cleaning staff from ethnic minorities that is all they aspire to be. Especially if they do not see people around them or members of their families in senior positions." In similar vein, Dr Zubaida Haque, who at the time of writing was research associate at the Runnymede Trust, said: "Government and school leaders should be concerned that over 60 per cent of black and ethnic minority teachers are thinking of leaving the teaching profession (Runnymede Trust 2017) and as one black secondary school teacher further stated during this research "[Schools] don't realise that ethnic minority children need role models from their own group."

3. Isolating London & Transgenerational Trauma

Bucking the trend is London, "The London area is significant in having a higher ratio of ethnic minority teacher representation to BAME pupils. London has some of the highest proportion of BAME teacher trainees in the country. Research conducted by the Greater London Authority indicated that the majority of teachers from black ethnic backgrounds were located in areas with the highest number of black pupils, namely the London boroughs of Hackney, Lambeth and Southwark, where 48- 50 per cent of pupils are black. It is therefore likely that ethnic minority teachers commonly work in areas where the student population is of a similar background to their own." (Regional BAME Representation in Schools DfE Census Data 2015)

However other factors affecting attainment come into play. According to Jennese Alozie, Head of Standards for the STEP Academy Trust, trauma comes into play "*The home is where identity is formed, shaped and influenced. Identity is also a product of the family context and what the parents' experiences have been. If the parents' lived experience is that they don't feel they have a place in the world, the child, inevitably picks up on that narrative and feels they don't have a place or belong anywhere either. In other words, the sense of identity and belonging is transgenerational. If we take this further and the child, now student, goes into an educational system where the*

curriculum and teaching staff reflect or reinforce that feeling of being displaced, invisible or non-existent, seemingly unworthy of a place in society, this then serves to reinforce that belief system and their identity. When that's in school, especially primary, it can do nothing but stagnate students. Everything that you see, feel and learn and the way in which that is delivered can potentially diminish children even further - where there is no opportunity within that educational system to latch onto anything that tells you that you are worth something."

4. Tools for eradicating casual racism in the curricula and teacher practice

Regarding the curriculum, in a 2017 TES article American Professor Philip Nel advocated that "Pupils should be taught about the inherent racism in well-known children's books, including Charlie and the Chocolate Factory". He goes on to say "Racism isn't always obvious in children's literature because of attempts to clean up classics – like Doctor Dolittle or Huckleberry Finn, but simply re-encode the original's racism in more subtle ways." He continues on to say, "It is a less-risky choice to teach offensive books critically, helping students see the ways in which they reinforce racism and engaging in painful, but sadly necessary conversations." Teachers should encourage a questioning approach, asking pupils to consider the views of the writers and why books are written from particular perspectives. "If we do nothing to address racism, we perpetuate the problem and sustain a racist status quo." (Professor Nel 2017).

Here in Britain, a survey by race equality think tank The Runnymede Trust for the National Union of Teachers (NUT) found that 32% of male and 27% of female teachers felt staff uncomfortable talking about race or sexism. BME teachers in particular spoke about an invisible glass ceiling and referenced a widespread perception among senior leadership teams that BME teachers "have a certain level and don't go beyond it". (Runnymede Trust 2017). If this is the case, how then can they be expected to challenge the curriculum?

As Alozie explains, *"Within the vehicle of education there are three things at play. There's education, which is the whole child and all their external factors, then you've got schooling - and then we have curriculum. If you were matching schooling and curriculum, then it could be argued that it is simply about learning facts and passing exams. If you're looking at education, then we need to question, what else is our role? We could be guilty of only 'schooling' children to drive the vehicle of curriculum. This is a concern if the curriculum itself is too thin, so are we really able to speak of educating the whole child? What should a curriculum consist of if we are pursuing the widest definition of education? It's having conversations about the contexts and narratives that surround our children, those we are seeking to educate that we should be speaking about. Are we sufficiently questioning how we truly develop and uplift our children, and what needs to be added or removed in order to achieve that? Although at STEP we have started to ask these questions – across our educational landscape we are not yet having those conversations in a conscious and direct way."*

Alozie further goes on to state, *"Parents that are conscious of the missing elements in the education system can fill in those gaps. They can make conscious efforts to shape their child's experiences and identity. But we need to*

all think of ourselves as conscious educators who need to be part of that shaping and start to make the necessary shifts in our educational landscape. We can seek to empower the next generation, knowing some parents may need our help. This partnership should start to mean that we create a richer educational experience where each child is represented and this has a direct impact on their sense of self and identity. We should ensure that we do not stop short at simply schooling.”

There is a crucial element to teaching, which is the training that one must undertake to qualify to teach. However, there is a lack of training around diversity and inclusion in the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (the one-year teacher training). Further Alozie, when explaining the implications of un confronted personal biases states, “*What I know in teacher training is that we don’t have an open dialogue about what our baggage is, coming into the profession. We just expect trainee teachers to learn how to educate children, forgetting that within us we all hold influences that create the lens through which we teach and how we view children and our peers. Because we don’t unpack our bags we’re not challenged in our belief system. This can sometimes mean that when stereotyping and prejudicial comments are made, we pretend we haven’t heard it or think it’s because the teacher is having an off day or the child was acting up. These are the ways casual racism or unconscious bias are allowed to permeate and exist - and it becomes a web under which children become trapped.*” A culture of honesty and frankness must be inclusive of comprehensively teaching diversity and equality in teacher training.

Another problem that persists is in the question of today’s generation of authors, Again, according to the academic Professor Nel; he said: “*I’ve spoken to living authors about racism in children’s literature and how to avoid it.*” Writers need to be aware that racism is “*woven into the fabric of the culture in which we live. It’s impossible to grow up in a racist culture and not have its ideas affect your thinking.*” (Professor Nel 2017)

There must be an open, responsible and honest look at training and education to deconstruct the outdated structures and allow race and racism to be a constant part of the conversation. We need an objective and impartial assessment of the curriculum, what is taught and how, including the messages that are subconsciously or consciously affirmed and reinforced.

5. Extent to which managing the social and emotional well being of students improves educational attainment

Going back to the idea of intergenerational trauma, the displacement of Africans and learnt behavior. We must look at how this presents as barriers to learning. We must understand the ways in which they manifest in behaviours and attitudes that hinder a sense of self-worth, self-agency, motivation and confidence in Black students.

As the mainstream attention on poor mental health in children and young people increases, there is an important emphasis on pastoral care in education; treating children holistically; and with the necessary understanding around the neuroscience of attachment and early childhood trauma. What is its impact on the brain and the

brains capacity to learn and retain information? There is evidence emerging to support the importance of mindful and informed language, as well as appropriate mental health training for teaching staff - including alternative disciplinary techniques such as meditation instead of detention.

A Baltimore school in the USA reported a decrease in suspensions after introducing a Mindful Moment room that children are sent to instead of to the principal. Before the Mindful Moment Room, students who got into trouble were sent to detention or to the principal's office. But since making the meditation room available, Thompson said, she rarely sees children for disciplinary issues anymore. "It's made a huge impact," she says. And for what it's worth, Thompson says she's had zero suspensions since the room's creation. The year before that, there were four suspensions. (CNN, 2016). Trauma and mental health awareness, therapeutic interventions and a school culture of kindness and compassion are proven to positively impact wellbeing, emotional regulation and therefore attainment.

In the London borough of Southwark, where according to mental health Local Index of Need (LIN) it ranks third, behind Hackney and the City and Lambeth. The March 2017 Child Health Profile reported the level of poverty to be true for 28.2% of children aged under 16 years, worse than the England average (20.1%). The rate of family homelessness is 5.6%, which is considerably worse than the England average (1.9%) also. Southwark has statistically significantly higher rates of hospital admissions under general psychiatry than the national average. 8.94% of mental health patients are of Black African (African, Afro-Caribbean, and other African backgrounds) compared with 3.32% of people in England and Wales. It's clear to see how material deprivation, poverty and negative environmental factors can have a strong bearing or link to a child's mental health, low aspiration and attainment. What's staggering is we don't talk enough about that. If people who were living in poverty are more likely to experience poor mental health compared to those from more affluent backgrounds (Townsend Study 1979) then mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for children (MBCT-C), a manualized group psychotherapy for children ages 9–13 years old (which was developed specifically to increase social-emotional resiliency through the enhancement of mindful attention) is an option to consider popularising.

In studies (Semple et al. 2009) for this type of therapy, participants of boys and girls aged 9–13, mostly from low-income and inner-city households, twenty-one of 25 children from ethnic minorities produced evidence of significant reductions in behavioural problems and anxiety symptoms. Results clearly demonstrate MBCT-C to be a promising intervention for attention and behaviour problems, and may reduce childhood anxiety symptoms (Semple et al. 2009).

To further support mindfulness and therapeutic practice in schools, KS2 teachers in an inner London school who referred four boys for anger reported that the weekly mindfulness sessions were helpful in tackling anger issues in the group, whose participants followed a three academic term mindfulness programme. There must be an approach to mental health that allows students the support for their emotional well-being. If schools are unsure how to formulate such an approach the Pupil Attitudes to Self and School (PASS) survey is an evaluation

tool that helps to gain insight into attitudes that could be hindering achievement. The PASS survey can show possible barriers to learning, including issues around confidence, resilience, motivation, concentration, disaffection and alienation; plus learnt behaviours and attitudes towards the education system. Failing to deal with the psyche of Black children in context of how history informs the present denies a duty of care to that child.

6. The Role of Black Educational Psychologists in the Educational System

Bisi Showunmi, an educational psychologist who at the time of writing works at the Learning Trust in the London Borough of Hackney holds the view that the importance of her work in the borough is crucial to understand. The power of a psychologist in being able to understand children (African and African Caribbean) in the deepest sense is key. Bisi is a first generation Nigerian Briton who at a very young age noticed the shortcomings of the education system. Through her research, Bisi found a significantly negative correlation with racial identity in English as a core subject. She experienced that the stronger your racial identity as an African or African Caribbean child, the worse achievement was in English (or England) as opposed to America where the stronger your racial identity the more positive impact this had on self-esteem. She also found that teachers in England in positions of power felt intimidated by increased group self-esteem among Black students. She commented that “on my placement in Hounslow, during my training at a Church of England girl’s secondary school, the Head of Year misinterpreted my intention and thought I could advise them on how to handle a group of Black girls in year 9 that hung around together. It was as if these girls having strength in themselves was a threat to whiteness and the behaviours they displayed were seen as an issue.” Her research and experience also suggested that, “For white middle class children I suspect mental health diagnoses are for things like anxiety and depression, where for Black children it was ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) and ODD (oppositional defiant disorder).” These are both telling observations that deserve further investigation on a national scale.

The fact of the matter is, that there is a big gap in educational psychology when it comes to understanding trauma, the Black psyche and the impact of uniquely Black struggles. The unfortunate reality is that there is a lack of literature or research on educational psychology as it relates to the Black British experience; especially as there is a tendency that Black children (who struggle with mental health issues) are shown less empathy from educational institutes. Again, Showunmi recalls a time that she was working with a single mother with a child of aged 4. The child displayed behaviours related to his mother’s poor mental health and was immediately referred to the re-engagement unit. She said, “it seems that teachers of all ethnicities appear to feel threatened by “black” children behavioural displays; almost as if out of fear. It’s as if children are seen to do it on purpose, even with a diagnosis.”

7. Summary

In summary, though a stark and sobering picture, there are positives to be taken. Though the findings explored show little improvements in action and attitude, there are emerging voices such as the Runnymede report bringing more awareness to this issue. We are in need of understanding and compassion for what is a unique experience for Africans and African Caribbean children in education. These more informed actions, more voices speaking and being heard; along with professionals of all ethnicities demanding a more accurate and fair representation alongside an educational culture that accurately reflects British society, in time, will result in better outcomes for all children of African descent.

References

CNN (2016). [online] <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/11/04/health/meditation-in-schools-baltimore/index.html> [Accessed 20 Apr. 2018].

Race.bitc.org.uk. (January 2010) HESA Student Record and Labour Force Survey – business in the community Race for Opportunity Available at:
https://race.bitc.org.uk/system/files/research/race_into_higher_education_complete.pdf [Accessed 20 Apr. 2018].

Table 6 Regional BAME Representation in Schools (England) DfE Census Data (2015) London

Tes.com. (2018). Top academic warns of 'subtle racism' in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory | Tes News. [online] Available at: <https://www.tes.com/news/school-news/breaking-news/top-academic-warns-subtle-racism-charlie-and-chocolate-factory> [Accessed 20 Apr. 2018].

Pells, R. (2018). Black and ethnic minority teachers face 'invisible glass ceiling' in schools, report warns. [online] The Independent. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/black-asian-ethnic-minority-teachers-invisible-glass-ceiling-racism-schools-report-runnymede-nut-a7682026.html> [Accessed 20 Apr. 2018].

tcf.org (2018) [online] https://tcf.org/assets/downloads/HowRaciallyDiverse_AmyStuartWells.pdf

Semple, R., Lee, J., Rosa, D. and Miller, L. (2009). A Randomized Trial of Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Children: Promoting Mindful Attention to Enhance Social-Emotional Resiliency in Children