

Cover sheet

**Assignment 5: Writing for Publication**

**How BAM can Improve  
The Wellbeing and Resilience of Black Professionals  
In  
Education**

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**(14060304)**

## **Abstract**

This is an article to be submitted for a journal as a 'viewpoint'/opinion piece on Black professionals and children who are often forced to comply with a pedagogy of white supremacy in the face of racial imbalance and many social injustices that often has a detrimental effect on their mental wellbeing, educational achievement and professional development. Using critical race theory, culturally relevant pedagogy and autoethnographic methodology, I explore my untold narrative of as a male Black British Jamaican professional to examine ways that my historical, societal, institutional and personal experiences have shaped me to become a surviving teacher in the British educational system. In doing so, the article presents recommendations to improve the wellbeing of Black professionals and children through the power of, politics and decolonisation at the centre of the Black Arts Movement (BAM), so crucial to my survival as a Black professional. Black in the context of this inquiry represents people of African heritage.

## **My Narrative**

*'Welcome to Kevin's World,'* one of many installations I have created to decolonise and represent my struggle as a Black British professional who like many others has made a unique contribution to teaching that is under-theorised and needs urgent investigation. The installation speaks my narrative, my working day, which is sadly typical of other unexplored Black narratives: 'A new learner enters my classroom and says to me, "Yo Nigger," and the Education Welfare officer (EWO) insists on using a 'pseudo Black,' gangster street dialect each time we meet, addressing me as 'blud'

in front of pupils. Unlike my white colleagues, I cannot support young people, without first addressing the fact that I do not sell 'ten bags,' and I do not take drugs. But staff and pupils take exception to this statement and insist that it is untrue, ignoring the safeguarding guidelines clearly set out by the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS). Continually, I am forced to explain in a very calm reassuring tone, that I am here to teach and provide much needed support, whilst clarify that as well as not being a local gangster or drug dealer, I do wash my hair, I am clean, and I do take offence to being compared to 'The Predator.' The continual, unchallenged micro aggressions described can take place within the first five minutes of a teaching day and can last all day, all week, all term and all year. These reactions are often repeated with each new intake, new colleagues and each new educational setting, whether it is a school, college, university or prison. For example, in previous schools I have been mistaken for a cleaner and in another school, I was refused entry because they could not believe I was their Art Moderator, despite presenting the correct documentation. Also, parents at some Parents' Evenings, have refused to see me and requested another teacher, because of my skin colour. Often singled out and powerless to react, I usually give a wide fake smile as I explain that I am a highly qualified teacher with the equivalent of three degrees and a wealth of experience, who has successfully taught many children and adults of all backgrounds over two decades. In the face of extreme provocation, I laugh at the challenges to my professionalism, as in my current role I gently decline inducements to engage in 'street talk' and the 'gangster' lingo and I will admit I have on occasion, very slowly remove my wrap and grudgingly allowed staff and pupils to touch the locs I have patiently cared for and grown over the past twenty years, as in that uncomfortable moment, I am powerless. It is important to mention that my hair and wrap are not fashion statements to be

mocked or disrespected, but they are symbolic of my spiritual journey, my struggle for decolonisation, my Black affirmation and freedom from mental slavery, as stated by brother Marley:

Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery;

None but ourselves can free our minds.

Have no fear for atomic energy,

'Cause none of them can stop the time.

How long shall they kill our prophets,

While we stand aside and look? Ooh!

Some say it's just a part of it:

We've got to fulfil the book.

(Marley and Wailers, 1980).

My story,' one story, is not uncommon and I believe it is representative of the hardships endured by many Black professionals in education who are often isolated and ill-equipped to deal with the day to day onslaught of micro/macro aggressions and racism in the workplace. In this context, I defer from using the term 'institutional racism,' as I feel it absolves individuals of responsibility for their erroneous behaviour. But what I have described is merely the tip of the iceberg and does not come close, to the full extent of what I and many others continue to endure in and out of education. For many years, I have coped with racist attitudes and despite my excellent pedagogic practice I am still overlooked for leadership roles, always being told in a patronising way that I am 'not ready yet and better suited to supporting

Black underachievers and those with behavioural problems.’ This is frustrating and annoying, as I now feel totally ‘deskilled’ and unable to achieve my full potential and it becomes difficult to conceal my emotions, which is often to the detriment of my wellbeing. In my experience as a highly visible solitary Black professional, we are often perceived as the aggressor who is effectively silenced and unable to respond or react to these situations. So to hide our emotions, we adopt a mask, a fake smile, always appearing overtly disarming, whilst suffering silently (Fanon, 2008). The great American abolitionist, Frederick Douglas on this point famously said:

“Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have the exact measure of the injustices and wrong which will be imposed on them”

Frederic Douglas (1857)

Black professionals in education are currently in crisis and some broken by countless equality and diversity policies that have not worked. So now, we must present the Black perspective on race to expose racism and its damaging effect it has on our wellbeing.

In my household as a first generation Black British Jamaican raised in a poor mainly white area, Black was always a negative with a small ‘b.’ And, like many Windrush descendants, we were taught to assimilate, speak good English, never use *patois*, behave in school and respect the Queen. The only cultural references allowed in our household were the sounds of Gladys Night, Al Green, Brook Benton and Trojan hits mixed with the rich warming smells of ackee and saltfish with hard dough

bread in the morning and, brown stew chicken, Gungo peas and rice after grace for Sunday dinner after a morning at the local Pentecostal church. Whilst I understood my parents were trying to protect me, my brother and three sisters in the only way they knew how in this foreign land, it did not protect us from the frightening white supremacist figure of Enoch Powell on ITV, identifying Black families like ours as the 'problematic Black culture' in his '*Rivers of Blood*' speech. This speech, like now exploited the socioeconomic fears of the White British working class, creating an anti-immigrant xenophobia, not dissimilar to the Windrush scandal that has seen legal British citizens threatened with the torture of deportation once again. In assessing the effect of this speech Michael and Ann Dummett (1982) contended:

Every Black person in the country not protected by some unusual environment such as a university must be able to testify not merely to the profound affront which Powell's utterances have given him, but to the shattering increase in personal abuse and expression of prejudice and hostility which each Powell speech has evoked in the white people he daily meets. The result is a situation in which the credibility of any official efforts to promote racial equality has reached vanishing point. (p.122)

(Dummett and Dummett, 1982)

As a young person of that time, I can testify to the harmful effects of the damaging rhetoric spewed out by public figures like Enoch Powell and Margaret Thatcher who openly endorsed Powell's anti-immigrant stance in her infamous "swamping" speech of 1978 (Christian, 2005). Each time these speeches were aired I had to walk the

gauntlet to school hand in hand with my two sisters, knowing what would befall us, WOG, NIGGER, COON and OOOKAY (Lenny Henry's famous catch phrase)! Voices of raw hatred echoing from either side of the alleyway. I clearly remember them spitting at us and the confused, hurt look of shock on my beautiful little sisters' faces as the spittle dripped from the bright ribbons in their freshly oiled hair and the quiet defiant anger I felt towards the perpetrators, as I ignored the green globules that sat on my perfect afro as I increased the grip on my sisters' hands as I tried to protect them. All this took place before we had even arrived at school, where this barrage became a whole lot worse for anyone who was Black before the Swan Report of 1985. However, even though the 1977 report on the West Indian Community, highlighted our plight with widespread concerns about the poor performance of West Indian Children in schools, there was no change and even though we excelled at primary level, our educational achievement much like many Black children now, declined at secondary level. We were all relegated to inclusion units and only allowed to excel in athletics, where it was deemed we were naturals and would win.

In the context of this discourse, I strongly believe my narrative and those of others are crucial to understanding and resolving the Black struggle as it presents for Black professionals and children in education. As I recount and extrapolate my experiences it becomes clear that nothing has changed since the Powell and Thatcherite eras. In fact, today's racism has worsened and is far more powerful and effective than in my day, as it is subversive and difficult to define, and politicians cannot be trusted to resolve the issues I have raised. This is why as a matter of great urgency, myself and thankfully a growing number of Black academics and artists are engaged in a critical pedagogy designed to re-examine the links between knowledge

and power and how power is maintained through educational institutions to resolve the crisis that has seen Black underachievement and exclusions increase and racism in the workplace at disproportionate epidemic levels (Marvin and Jennings, 2009).

### **Black Underachievement in schools**

'What's changed since my narrative? Nothing, when we look at recent reports that show Black children of African heritage continue to either underachieve or are excluded from schools in disproportionate numbers. The evidence that has been available from individual LEA's (Local Educational Authorities in the United Kingdom) has tended to show that the relative performance of Black Caribbean pupils begins high, starts to decline in Key stage 2 (ages 7-11), tails off badly in Key Stage 3 (ages 11 – 14) and is below that of most other ethnic groups by Key Stage 4 (14-16). Nothing, when read the recent Lammy report that shows the short comings of the Criminal Justice System (CJS), which systemically targets Black youths who are scapegoated for societies woes, a useful divergence at a time of austerity, Brexit and economic uncertainty (Lammy, 2017). This has given rise to a 'school to prison pipeline' for Black people, which I have observed as a mainstream teacher and in my role as Learning Difficulties and Disabilities coordinator (LDD) at a local dispersal prison. Nothing, when we take into account the Lawrence Inquiry, that exposed institutional racism as a major issue in the United Kingdom and on this, Doreen Lawrence makes this damning assertion on where we are now when she stated:



In some respects, we are beginning to become a little more complacent again. People think that we have had an inquiry and so everything's fine, but it's not. There are lots of people still complaining about racist attacks.

(Casiani, 2003)

I would say society has become 'very complacent and totally blind' to resolving these issues, even though the Lawrence inquiry recommendations stated that it was important to prevent racism through education. The inquiry recommended the need for the value of cultural diversity within the national curriculum, yet the British education system continues to offer a predominantly White-oriented cultural frame of reference. However, despite this advice, Black history month has been abandoned, many Black organisations have had their funding cut and Black teachers are still forced to teach a very confusing white curriculum that is demeaning and tells a Eurocentric history/narrative bound with many untruths.

In my opinion Black exclusions are simply another manifestation of this historical assault on Black humanity and social injustice and when I recount my experiences in education many respond by saying ".....it's a thing of the past (silenced again)." So this is '*Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race (Eddo-Lodge, 2018).*' However, though many may deny the facts, I can find a thousand reasons why this is not so, for the social fact remains that Black children will be the heirs to the Black struggle for many generations to come unless the policy makers face the facts that are readily available but interpreted to suit the White British establishment perspective. And, presently, there is only a negative depiction of Black/African culture via Eurocentric and ethnocentric learning, that continues to be reaffirmed by

current popular culture representations i.e. urban fashions, grime, hip-hop to name a few (Mercer, 2009).

As we look ahead (to Black and Asian presence in Britain). I am filled with foreboding; like the Roman. I see “the Riber Tiber foaming with much blood.”

What has not been made public knowledge is that fact that the blood that has run in the “British River” has mainly and disproportionately emanated from the bodies of people of colour.” According to Graham, Black people have been systematically set up to fail in British society by successive British governments since 1962 and this needs to be acknowledged openly just as the police have now come to accept that the education system is a particular site of contention for Black communities as it has historically either undervalued Black students or miseducated them (Graham, 2001).

### **Black Professionals**

I believe what is needed to resolve these difficulties and is missing from present day research, statistics and policies is the Black voice and narratives that present the African-centred perspectives needed to interrupt particular historical, situated systems of oppression to tackle the systemic failure of inclusive practices and the rise of right wing white supremacist control of education. There is a dire need for a fresh intellectual approach that is free from the shackles of white-led educational policies in dealing with Black underachievement and the Black voice/perspective is better able to communicate issues of which whites have no knowledge or experience. However, it is clear from my experiences, abundant reports and

quantitative data highlighting Black underachievement in schools that there are many barriers that hinder a Black person's ability to progress to a professional level regardless of their academic acumen compared to their white counterparts. So far, I have shown the harmful effects of overt and institutional racism faced by Black children in schools based on my experiences and that of others, which has a lasting impact on their career progression and mental health. But unfortunately, at a professional level current reports have shown that this becomes considerably worse.

From my observations as a professional teacher, the dearth of Black teachers across the educational system is directly connected to poor schooling and negative experiences in mainstream schools and higher education, which is why currently there are 503,900 teachers in state-funded schools in England according to a DfES report, of which only 1% (4,900) are Black Caribbean teachers (DfE, 2018). 1.0% of Black teachers at K – 12, yet there is an urgency to recruit and retain these teachers in the present climate. This is exacerbated by the 'Teacher Training Agency's' recruiting policies in the United Kingdom which I believe are grounded in spurious claims about the potential of ethnic minority teachers to improve the academic performance of African Caribbean children. There seems to be an assumption that white teachers can teach all, but Black teaching is race specific, which is why there is a concentration of Black teachers in poor urban areas (Pole, 1999) . There is little focus on how the organisation of school knowledge, curriculum and broader structural influences affect minority students and professionals engagement with schooling (C. McCarthy et al., 2009). McCarthy, Rezai-Rashti and Teasley (2009) for instance argue:

That an educational reform model that insists on the consolidation of more diversity in schooling, more inclusion, simply leads to an exhaustion of available school resources without changing the way in which knowledge is organised and education is delivered to minority and majority students.  
(p. 93)

McCarthy's 1998 work is useful in pointing to the problem of treating race as a fixed or singular category as "one cannot understand race, paradoxically, by looking at race alone (C. McCarthy, 1998). I argue for the need to engage with an antiracist policy that refuses to suppress the heterogeneity of subject positions, which I have identified as problematic at the core of fundamental inadequacies in schools. As Hall argues:

The shift is best thought of in terms of a change from a struggle over the relations of representation to a politics of representation itself. It would be useful to separate out such a politics of representation into its different elements (p. 253).

(Hall, 1992)

According to McCarthy, when role modelling becomes limited to "a representational formula" for addressing equality and social justice within the context of an urban school reform agenda, there is "a failure to address problems lying deeper down in the socials: race, class, gender, and their expression in the fundamental inequality which schooling produces within its very organisation of knowledge (C. McCarthy et al., 2009)." Therefore, racial equality is accommodated only when it converges with

the interests of white policy makers and other decision makers. This is why it is important for Black professionals to move past the concrete ceiling to positions of power and responsibility and in this context, colour-blindness has proved ineffectual as it is a refusal to see race and the many underlying problems. For this reason, it is imperative that we improve the wellbeing and reliance of Black professionals currently in education and remove the barriers, so more can enter and contribute to the education system.

### **Art Wellbeing**

At this point of my career as a teacher and professional artist, enduring years of racial abuse and mental torture, I have come to the conclusion that the arts and Black narratives, which are ignored in favour of white Eurocentric scientific methods is the most favourable and effective method to address the deeper problems lying in socials of race, gender and class. For scientific methods, whilst they expose the enormity of the problems faced by Black communities, do not provide the 'gritty truths' and nuances of Black experiences required to gain a 'deeper understanding' of these issues and I believe without this perspective, how can real resolutions be found? It is clear, integration, multi-culturalism and colour-blindness have been non-effective so there needs to be a political platform of action to challenge and disrupt white supremacist constructs that are embedded in society and the educational microcosm. On this point McCarty argues:

.... Racial differences is, therefore, to be understood as subject-position that can only be properly defined in "political terms" ... that is, in terms of

the effects of struggles over social and economic exploitation, political disenfranchisement and cultural and ideological repression (p. 26).

(C McCarthy, 1990)

Quantitative research methods cannot account for the histories and personal stories of Black individuals required to develop a true understanding of the challenges faced by many Black peoples. And, the 'scientific' positivist approach commonly adopted to investigate these issues are often presented from a Eurocentric viewpoint that is incorrect or too detached from the subject to understand the complexities of the problems encountered by Black communities. Due to the complexities of a dislocated people who seek equality and social justice, as well as freedom from the white supremacist hegemonic dogma, a multidimensional theoretical approach is required, which is why in this context Critical race theory (CRT) is important, as it offers a critical holistic perspective on the Black experience.

This is why I would argue that post-qualitative research methods as presented through art is the superior methodology to explore and understand the thoughts and feelings of Black communities enduring macro/micro aggressions in and out of the educational system because they are free of the limitations of language and its inherent difficulties of interpretation. It is time for new more open approaches, which I believe post-qualitative and visual research methods can provide as they give greater access to more important possibilities that have not been fully explored. These less elite and less traditional emancipatory paradigms are better able to understand how it 'feels' to endure the binary imbalances that inhibit the progression of Black professionals and children in our British schools and universities.

Fortifying my well-being by using the arts as a therapeutic, political and cathartic intervention has had a positive effect on my mental health and resilience giving me the strength to take the plight of Black communities out into the public domain. An example is the '*Captured Africans*,' public art sculpture I created for the STAMP (Slave



Fig 1

Trade Art Memorial Project) commission. This was the first memorial public sculpture to memorialize enslaved Africans by a quayside in the UK. I have also engaged in international residency programmes in the United Kingdom, Dubai, The Netherlands



and Mali where I have worked with other international African artists. For me the arts have always provided a free space where we are no longer silenced, where we can raise our plight and share our stories to maintain our sanity. I make this point in the biography I wrote for the '*Statements of Intent*' exhibition in Dubai:

“...Understanding the dislocation experienced by many Diasporic artists has been central to my work as a professional visual artist. My specialism is ceramics, where I feel at home, making large expressive sculpted busts that act as a visual diary of events that reflect my identity and journey as an African Diasporic man living in the United Kingdom...”

Issues of identity are crucial to understanding today's society and more specifically to Kevin's work as a British/Jamaican visual artist born in the United Kingdom. Like many others he experiences a great sense of displacement from living with the effects of limited and fragmented information about their culture and heritage. The highly emotive and powerful ceramic busts he creates are cathartic and provide a spiritual connection with his African ancestors. They explore issues of identity, displacement and de-colonization of the mind and confront an art world deeply rooted in the politics and ideals of a colonial past and challenge this existing structure through interrogation and representation. They are informed by personal experience and post graduate research at The University of Manchester.”

Black experiences, narratives and perspectives are often revealed in the art of Black artists and over many years, I have worked with Black artists around the world, who use their work as a political platform to show that we are not as integrated as many

would think. Their visual commentaries show that we are rapidly returning to the Jim Crow era of segregation, mis-representation and annihilation that is not only affecting Black children and professionals, but it is also having a detrimental effect on white populations as pseudo Black representations proliferates and causes irreprehensible damage to the well-being of the many.

The postpositivist paradigm and the data generated from quantitative research methods have revealed that Black professionals and learners are in crisis, but my experiences and interviews I have conducted have revealed that art is a powerful political and therapeutic force that can be used to challenge and address the issues identified. I say this because the Black Arts Movement (BAM), with its critical race framework is crucial to understanding the origins of years of discrimination, alienation and institutional racism.

According to Broussine, art as a research method is very helpful due to its immediacy of expression and the emotions that they capture or evoke, an important aspect of this inquiry. They provide a useful insight into the psyche, thoughts and feelings of the participants. For example, in my installation '*Welcome to Kevin's World,*' the viewer is scrutinised in the same way oppressed groups are scrutinised and objectified daily. In the feedback to the installation, audience participants expressed discomfort when they stood in the middle of the piece and could only stand there for limited periods. Others said the sculptures appeared to talk to them and some became emotional. Through this raw expression of emotions, conveyed in this installation, the viewer/participant gained a momentary insight into the harsh world of a Black person.



Fig 2

In another installation '*Strange Fruit*' in Amsterdam, audiences were moved by the representation of the lynchings during the civil rights movement during the 1960s. The installation was a metaphor for the low value of the Black life, showing that '*Black Lives Matter.*' Denise Janah a famous Jazz singer, after singing '*Strange fruit*' in Surinamese, blessed everyone present to show the healing power of fairness and equality. Lastly there is the '*Trade and Empire: Remembering Slavery* at the Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester.' As guest-curators I chose the art works of Black artist Tony Phillips. His series of etchings '*A History of the Benin Bronzes*' captured the sense of dislocation caused by the legacy of trade and empire a commentary on the British Punitive Expedition into Benin in 1897 and its aftermath. Using the

etching, I created *'Revealing Histories'* table that showed the confusion and dislocation felt by those of the African diaspora who live with fragmented histories.



Fig 3

Art has allowed me to make sense of the world and create understandings that have enabled me to assume the powerful emancipatory stance of 'letting go,' that is evident in my documented personal story. Through my artworks, documentations and interviews I have autoethnographically set the scene, telling my story and that of others, whilst weaving intersections of art, life experiences and theory. This is

relevant because this non-rationalist and non-discursive way of knowing presents the view of the oppressed that is often ignored in academia (Muncey, 2014).



Fig 4

The turning point for me was the positive involvement in the Black Arts Movement (BAM) as a member of Black Art Alliance (BAA) with SuAndi (Cultural Director). Here, I have found the arts and the fellowship of other Black brothers and sisters to be the most effective and constructive method to shield my wellbeing from the attrition of racism in its many forms. It also improved my understanding of my cultural heritage and reduced the nagging feelings of displacement and dislocation illustrated in the *'Revealing Histories'* table above.

During this period, many questions were raised and answered and many 'truths' revealed. This started in 1986 with my involvement with the exhibition *The Other Story* (1989). This was the first retrospective exhibition of British African, Caribbean and Asian modernism, which had a positive profound effect on me and inspired me to take a political stance through its exploration of the roots of Britain's imperialist attitudes to race, nationalism and internationalism, the exhibition's contribution to the erosion of ethnic barriers in art establishments and its role in changing cosmopolitan perspectives on British diasporian art. The exhibition was curated by Rasheed Araeen and featured work by Sonia Boyce, Eddie Chambers, Lubaina Himid, Ronald Moody and Keith Piper.

Since being inspired by '*The Other Story*' and involvement in BAM, I have gained a wider understanding of the Black perspective by engaging in International Art Residency programmes in The Netherlands as part of IFAA08 directed by Sithabile Mlotshwa (Zimbabwe). Sithabile sees the arts as a catalyst for change innovation and human advancement so the residency programme is set up as an ephemeral space of encounter, facilitating creativity and knowledge production by bringing together artists from all over the world interested in strengthening cross-cultural knowledge and exchange. Involvement with IFAA and my commitment to understanding my cultural heritage through art took me to the penultimate part of my journey of decolonisation and that was back to my roots in Africa at the Centre *Soleil D'Afrique*.

During this residency in Bamako I was accepted not as a Black British Jamaican from Manchester, but as a brother who had returned home. This was very important

to me, as even though I still did not find out which part of African I originate from, being accepted as an African proved more important as it allowed me to 'let go' as now I felt proud of the African heritage that had been so problematic and I return to the United Kingdom mentally stronger and better equipped to deal with life in Britain as Black British citizen, such is the power of art.



Fig 5

## **Conclusion**

This is just one untold story, one untold journey of understanding, discovery and decolonisation that has improved the mental health and wellbeing of one individual, ensuring survival in a challenging educational system. I firmly believe that if I did not have the arts and the association with other artists of African heritage, I would not

have survived twenty-five years teaching in the British educational system that does not treat Black professional and children fairly. Now I am not saying that every Black professional should follow my path and return to Africa as I did, through it would be beneficial if they could. But what I am arguing for is a return of BAM, as based on my experiences it is clear that the 2010 'Equality and Diversity act that replaced the 'Commission for Racial Equality' is not meeting our needs. Why? Because the 'glass ceiling' that prevents Black professionals from moving up to higher positions where they can change white supremacist policies that cause the harm I have exposed through my narrative remains in place. So in the advent of this I believe Black art is needed and more importantly BAM to challenge the White supremacist patriarchy referred to by Hooks (Lee, 1990). BAM like CRT seeks to understand the origins and operation of oppressive social structures and is able to expose the social injustice mentioned and quell the pain of ongoing racist attitudes that impinge on the lives of many people of African descent, especially those in the educational system. Because of the inequalities in education, the Black voice is needed now more than ever, we need more Black teachers and we need to improve the resilience and wellbeing of those still in the profession. This cannot be achieved by writing another Eurocentric theory-based dissertation that is accessed by academics that are predominately white. I believe the arts through exhibitions and installations that travel can take this valuable information out of academia to the communities where it is better served. Here it can help the and improve the wellbeing of the many not the few as it has for me.



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