

The Challenges For The Black Professional and The White Curriculum

“Yo blood, yo nigger, do you smoke weed, do you work here, are you a proper teacher, should you be here, or are you the cleaner?” These are a few of the questions directed at me daily in various settings from colleagues, parents and pupils. There have also been racist jokes, hair touching, mistaken identity and the looks of surprise or disgust as I enter the staffroom from those of the bohemian politically correct left who dare not declare their underlying racist attitudes. Throughout my teaching career such comments that have defined my professional identity and started at primary school have seeped into my consciousness, giving rise to intense feelings of isolation, fear and mistrust. They have also lead to me to internalise whether I am the problem or am I being overly sensitive, that is until fellow White colleagues inform me that such things have never happened to them. Naively I had assumed this behaviour was only prevalent in mainstream education, however when engaging in PhD research at a local university (Art History and Visual Cultures department), I encountered more extreme racialised behaviours and a distinct lack of the Black presence. As well as being on the front line of racism, I have also observed over the years the systematic marginalisation of Black children and adults in schools, universities and offender learning. For this reason, throughout most of my teaching career I have tried to understand the cause of this behaviour and how I can perform as a consummate professional in such a potentially hostile environment.

Throughout thirty years teaching in SEN, mainstream, post-sixteen and offender learning I have observed many changes from the introduction of GCSE's to the implementation of the national curriculum, changes of educational policy and numerous adjustments to the SEN code of practice. However, whilst there have also been many positive changes to educational policy, supposedly to ensure all learners have a fair and balanced education and to ensure all teaching professionals are treated fairly and justly, very little has changed since I started teaching. It appears from my experience that inclusive initiatives (multiculturalism, integration, equality and diversity and widening participation) have not proved effective and have created an exclusive tiered institutionally racist educational system that inhibits the progress and development of BME learners and professionals.

Teaching is a highly demanding profession with many difficulties, but I have relished the many challenges and found it to be an extremely rewarding profession. However, I have noticed that Black professionals educational are presented with a unique range of challenges and difficulties that are often not acknowledged and there is little to no support. Through this critical analysis of my professional practice I seek to expose the many difficulties encountered by myself and other Black professionals and learners in the British educational system and show how I have overcome the many barriers to my professional practice.

First I will discuss the DFE national statistics data that explains why I am part of a small number of Black professionals in education. The data shows that Caribbean teachers only account for 1% of the national teaching workforce, making my experience not so unusual (DFE, 2015a). The same report also showed that teachers from 'Other

backgrounds' accounted for only 3.7% of the national teaching workforce and when it comes to leadership roles the figure widens as 97% of English head teachers are White. Working in a racially imbalanced environment prompted me to take CPD seriously and engage in post-graduate study to take my teaching career to a higher level. This racial imbalance is also evident at the top in the House of Commons where the proportion of BME members of Parliament is 7.5% (Newman, 2016). My experience of education along with the data presented show that racial inequality is thriving even though schools and prisons have a legal obligation to comply as clearly stated in the 2015 Code of practice (COP), which states:

Public bodies, including further educational institutions, local authorities, maintained schools, maintained nursery schools, academies and free schools are covered by the public sector equality duty and, when carrying out their functions, must have regard to the needs to eliminate discrimination, promote equality of opportunity and foster good relations between disabled and non-disabled children and young people (DFE, 2015b).

Chris Keates, general secretary of the NASUWT on this issue states: “.....it is clearly unacceptable and it is also disgraceful. Education is such a powerful determiner of life chances. All children and people working in education should be treated with dignity and with access to equality. That clearly is not happening (Newman, 2016).”

Despite obligatory government directives BME exclusion rates for are still rising, BME attainment is still lower than the national average and the number of BME prisoners is rising, which prompts me to think there is something fundamentally wrong with our

educational system and Sir William McPherson in the 1999 *McPherson Report* raised this issue after the unlawful racial murder of Stephen Lawrence. Here he defined the institutional racism I had observed as “The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people of colour, culture and ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people (McPherson, 1999).” This is in direct contravention of the *2010 Equality Act* , which clearly states that “As far as schools are concerned, for the most part, the effect of the current law is the same as it has been in the past – meaning that schools cannot unlawfully discriminate against pupils because of their sex, race, disability, religion or belief of sexual orientation (DFE, 2014).” On this matter the new Public Sector Equality Duty Guidance for Schools in England clearly states the new duties extend to all aspects of a person’s characteristics are protected under the Equality Act 2010. Further clarification of equality rights and responsibilities are outlined in three elements:

1. Eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimization and other conduct that is prohibited by the Equality Act 2010
2. Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it
3. Foster good relations across all protected characteristics – between people who share protected characteristics and people who do not share it.

(Commission, 2014)

Through academic research and discussions with other black professional I have learnt that racial discrimination and the marginalisation of Black people that I have observed during my teaching career started with the advent of colonialism, where much of history was written from a Eurocentric perspective and presented as truth in spaces of authority (schools, galleries, museums and churches) to control the proletariat and justify the slave trade, castigating the Black opposite other as inferior beings. This is prevalent in today's educational space where the National Curriculum promotes the White hegemonic view that dominates even though we live in a multi-racial society. The national curriculum does not reflect the cultural identities of Black pupils and is exclusively White. This harmful rhetoric was evident when I was at school where the curriculum was White, my history was negatively reduced to the slave trade, a small African continent, White Egyptians and black people making no positive contribution to history or society.

In my experience the educational system appears flawed from the classroom to the staffroom, resulting in a rise of over-qualified Black professionals who are held back from high positions because of their cultural heritage. These issues are entrenched, endemic and institutional as borne out data collected by the 'Joseph Rowntree Foundation for the Institute for Public Research (IPPR), which stated that Black African graduates are at the top of the list as the most overqualified in jobs, suggesting that they are most discriminated against (Onibada, 2016). This I have encountered over the years, as I am often overlooked over for higher positions even though I have an unblemished teaching record, a first class honours degree, a masters, post-graduate leadership diplomas and evidence of sound pedagogic practice. Yet after 30 years of in

education I remain at the lower end of the teaching scale. Whilst I accept there could be other reasons for this lack of progression, I cannot help thinking race is the primary reason why I and other Black professionals are not able to progress as quickly as we would expect. On this note in 2014 a major NASUWT-commissioned study into the equality impact of reforms to teacher pay found BME teachers tended to be paid less than White teachers and were much less likely than White teachers to hold senior leadership positions (Salley-Anne Barnes, 2016).

At this juncture, it is important to mention that I am a Black British/Jamaican of the African Diaspora, teaching in various educational settings. Currently I am subject lead for Art/Design Technology across three sites, at a local Pupil Referral Unit (PRU). I am also a newly qualified Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO), having passed the 'National Special Educational Needs Coordinator (NASENCO) postgraduate course at a local university with distinction. Also through postgraduate study I have gained a sound understanding of current Special Educational Needs (SEN) Code of practice, which has helped me to engage/support learners that present with complex needs and provide training and support for teachers, prison officers and support staff in the various settings where I have taught. Gaining an understanding current developments in mainstream education was particularly important at this stage in my career, as previously I taught for eight years in the highly specialised Offender learning at the local category 'A' dispersal prison. In addition, postgraduate study has provided me with the leadership skills required to advance my professional development as I seek to influence policy decisions to improve conditions for marginalised groups.

I am well accustomed to being the sole visible Black minority person/professional present in each institution where I have taught, but it is important to say that this has not been without huge internal and external struggles. This is because struggles and issues of identity in the context of the BME professional of the African diaspora are highly complex, but important to resolve if we are to fulfill their professional role and navigate through life as a minority. In my case, this has been more problematic as I am also a gay man. This has resulted in feelings of alienation and dislocation experienced by most BME of the African diaspora as in this instance it is very difficult to construct an identity of truth, which is the common desire of everyone, when my cultural heritage is dislocated and inaccessible due to the slave trade and the colonisation of my homeland. Zizek shows the importance of history and identity in the following quote:

Stories are precious, indispensable. Everyone must have his history, her narrative. You do not know who you are until you possess the imaginative version of yourself. You almost do not exist without it. (Zizek, 1993)

How can one construct an identity when there is no visible history on which to build it? According to Brown 'we provide an account of our past that makes sense of our current actions and we have stories to help us for the present, as we make sense of the past (Brown, 2001).' Based on this theory, it becomes evident the difficulties faced by Black professionals who are trying to survive with a dislocated past and a constructed future. In the case of the Black professional, is one identity sufficient, as I have had to construct multiple identities to survive in education and the wider society as a BME professional. I understand identities are not fixed and in my experience, they are in a constant state of flux and never complete, as the identity constructed is often in reaction to the identity

projected by others onto the 'other' (namely me and other Black professionals). These perceptions of difference are tied to imperial political identifications of nation and self, ideas of "Britishness" that involve relations of power and continue to have a profound effect on the self-image and social experiences of BME, especially post-Brexit.

For a long time, both Americans and Europeans in different ways have been obsessed with identity politics with both cultures deeply structured in relation to racial identity built primarily on fear. This fear is deeply rooted in primeval feelings about Black bodies and are fueled by sexual myths of Black men and women. The myths presented in the curriculum and past and present day images of Blackness offer a distorted, dehumanised reflection in the Lacanian mirror, making it difficult for those of the African diaspora to like the features that set them apart from their White counterparts, thus hindering their confidence to progress and achieve higher professional positions.

This othering experienced by myself and many Black professionals started during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries where European colonisers treated colonised people's cultures and the people themselves not simply as different but as inferior. In his 1952 book, *Black Skin, White Mask*, the post-colonial theorist Franz Fanon noted this effect:

I met a Russian, or a German, who speaks French badly. With gestures, I try to give him the information that he requests, but at the same time I can hardly forget that he has a language of his own, a country, and that perhaps he is a lawyer or an engineer there. In any case, he is foreign to my group and his standards must be different. When it comes to the

Negro, nothing of this kind. He has no culture, no civilisation, and no long historical past (Fanon, 2008).

Fanon suggest that a colonial culture was not treated as an equal by Europeans, but as an inferior system. He implies that a person with Black skin was turned by the power of the person with White skin into a 'White' mask. Therefore, those designated as 'Black' are not recognised and they were as he termed, the silenced 'other.' The term 'other' derives from Hegel's master and slave dialectic in the work of Lacan, for Hegel, the master should consciously experience his being a master in relation to his slave. Their consciousness can exist only through being experienced through one another in a process of mutual recognition. The term refers to everything that is different and opposite from the individual or group who is speaking. The outcome from the Black perspective is the 'double consciousness' described by post-colonial theorist W. E. B. Dubois, when he says: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt."

Fantasies and stereotypes of the Black 'other' are particularly evident in today's popular culture and in the classroom as I watch Black and White learners listening to 'grime' music and speaking in a pseudo Black dialect. I have noticed a proliferation of images and music that present the Black other as highly sexualised and hyper-aggressive through the promotion of gang culture in music. This can make it very difficult for people (Black and White) to accept a BME person in a professional role and it is something that I continually try to address in my teaching. Unfortunately, many of the young people I have taught have accepted/adopted this damaging identity, making the Black

professional identity problematic in the educational space, as it does not match the stereotypical identity presented by the White hegemony. This I would say is a contributory factor to the feelings of alienation expressed earlier and the underachievement of BME learners and professionals across the educational strata. This has motivated me to work harder than my peers, and achieve more qualifications to remain in the profession. It has also informed my career choices, as I seek to challenge this problematic pseudo Black identity, and institutional racism through my pedagogic practice. Not only have I done this by staying in education, but also by making a deliberate choice to teach in predominantly White demographic areas, knowing that I will be under constant surveillance and endure micro/macro aggressions (that I will discuss later). Much of the racist attitudes I have encountered come from a place of ignorance, as many in the communities where I have taught have never seen a Black person, let alone a Black professional. In making this decision I have changed the attitudes of many not by challenging issue of race directly, as this can be counterproductive, but by being a positive Black professional role model (which is an added pressure). So the parents who once refused to discuss their child's progression with me at parents evening, are now thanking and continue to update me on their child's progress post-transition. Also, children who once assumed all Black people are aggressive gangster's with no qualifications, no longer see colour and only see Kevin their teacher, however being on the frontline has taken its toll on me as a Black professional.

The constant scrutiny I have experienced in education has heightened my awareness of how others perceive the Black professional and it explains why the Black presence is so

low in education. This was particularly evident at the local dispersal prison where I worked as the learning difficulties and disabilities coordinator (LDD). In this setting, I dealt with daily racial abuse from officers and inmates; I underwent additional security checks on entry to the prison estate. Even though my ID security card was always visible, I was still often mistaken for an inmate and on a couple of occasions almost arrested and escorted to security. Officers and offenders often assumed I was carrying contraband items, putting my professionalism under question. Black inmates would shout “coconut, Uncle Tom, Bounty, from the top of the wings and throw prison issue toilet paper at me as they saw me as a part ‘Babylon,’ the hegemonic institution that oppresses Black people. Daily I would challenge these perceptions of what it is to be Black by posing the following question “.....so if I am right, are you telling me that to be Black means I have to have committed a crime and cannot be a qualified Black professional on the right side of this table?” To me such interactions exposed their perception of the Black identity and to me revealed that they had accepted the hegemonic pseudo Black identity discussed earlier, as from their gaze I was less Black because I was an educated professional. However, in doing so, it again validated why I had to pursue my career as a Black professional in offender learning and stand fast to change these perceptions of Blackness and increase the Black presence.

Freire affirms my decision to continue teaching and challenge hegemonic norms in his publication *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Here he states “.... man’s ontological vocation is to be a subject who acts upon and transforms the world, and in doing so move towards ever new possibilities of fuller and richer life individuality and collectively.” He also make it clear that this is possible in the same publication, when he states that this

world is not a static or closed orders, or a given reality which man must accept and to which he must adjust; rather, it is a problem to be worked on and solved (Freire, 2014).” This internalisation of inferiority as manifest through racism is a colonial construct designed to damage to the Black psyche. It is well documented how extremely harmful and divisive this internalisation is as it turns the oppressed against the oppressed as exposed by post-colonial Franz Fanon in his publication *Black Skin White Mask* (Fanon, 2008). As the only Black teacher in the prison, with no support, I was under pressure to make sure my classes were perfect, with no breaches of security. To straddle these perceptions of the Black professional from all offenders, officers and colleagues across the prison estate, so I had to develop an identity that had a great deal of slippage, to fulfill the requirements of my professional role in an institution that oppressed marginalised groups (including SEN offenders), whilst retaining my Black identity. So, to survive my identity had to be malleable and adaptable to suit the many challenging situations I must deal with as a professional in the many different institutions where I have taught.

The NASUWT says institutional racism in its many forms will only change with an increase of the Black presence in education. This point was made by Ben-Moshe in her publication *Disability, Incarcerated: Imprisonment and Disability in the United States and Canada*. She states that if equality is to be achieved for marginalised groups, there needs to be more Black and disabled people working in these institutions to address the issue, but in my experience this is not as easy as it appears (Ben-Moshe, 2014). Tori DeAngelis highlights some of these difficulties in her research into the harmful effect of racial micro aggressions, when she says:

Some racism is so subtle that neither victim nor perpetrator may entirely understand what is going on, which may be especially toxic for people of colour (DeAngelis).

The term 'racial micro aggressions' was first defined by psychiatrist Chester M. Pierce, MD, in the 1970's. In his journal *A Threat in the Air: How Stereotypes Shape intellectual Identity and Performance*, he asserts that the social pressures I have identified can frustrate a person's ability to identify with the institution (domain) where they are situated, thus leading to a lowering of achievement and success. Based on the assumption that one must identify with the institution and this depends on positive achievement, which translates into sustained achievement motivation, if a person feels valued and has a sense of belonging with good prospects, they should achieve. However, if this relationship is broken, then the person's achievement will suffer (Steele, 1997). Steele identifies a further barrier as a stereotypical threat or a threat in the air, where bad stereotypes about these groups apply, members of that group can fear being reduced to that stereotype. For those who identify with the domain to which the stereotype is relevant, this predicament can be self-threatening.

Years of constant scrutiny, surveillance and racial abuse on the frontline of education over twenty years made me concerned for my mental health and emotional well-being. I realised that if I did not care for my own well-being, then I would survive in this profession and constructively counteract the harmful effects of micro/macro aggressions in the work place, whilst challenging negative stereotypes and meet the needs of 'all' the learners I have a duty of care for. So I

decided to take a break from the teaching profession to decolonise my mind through academic research and the catharsis of art, as I strongly believe that academic research and creativity can work very well together in the context of the issues I have identified. I also thought this was necessary so that I could give more to my pedagogic practice and remain a positive Black professional role model for 'all' learners.

I have focused on the nature of the construction of racial, ethnic and sexual difference in Britain, and how this has caused difficulties for Black professionals in education. I also considered the way people and societies have sought to define themselves in relation to what they perceive as their opposites and I found that in Britain, these perceptions of difference are tied to imperial political identification of nation and self and ideas of 'Britishness' that involve relations of power that are difficult to eradicate and continue to have a profound effect on Black professionals.

As part of my cathartic journey and my quest to challenge White hegemonic norms through my practice, I sought refuge in my other profession as an established international artist by creating Britain's first public sculpture by a quayside to memorialise the slave trade. The sculpture is called '*Captured Africans*' in Lancaster as part of the '*Slave Trace Art Memorial Projects (STAMP)*.' When designing this public sculpture my focus was put the slave trade on exhibition, the same way that I and many other BMEs are on exhibition daily and it was also a way to show respects to my ancestors that paved the way for me. I did not want it to be an object of guilt, but a celebration of what my people had and continue to achieve in the face of great adversity. *Captured Africans* provided a place to pause

and think, for quiet reflection on the human cost of my history and its legacy. This public sculpture represents the slave ships that ripped one hundred million of my African ancestors away from their homes and families. The front stainless steel column lists many of the ships that sailed from this quay and the number of slaves they picked up in Africa and a mosaic shows the origins and destinations. (Martlakes, 2008). This was a truly empowering experience that set me on the positive road to decolonisation, helping me to understand and celebrate who I am through 'correctly' representing cultural heritage in the public space.

Academic research through informative and empowering, did provide the threptic decolonisation I was seeking, nor did it answer my questions as many theorists, ideologies and perspectives presented on the course were mostly Eurocentric and I was encouraged to research my cultural heritage from a Eurocentric ethnographic perspective. For this reason, I decided the best way to find 'truths' about my culture was to go to Africa, which is why I applied for funding from the Fonz BKVB Art foundation in Amsterdam, to go on a residency programme at Soleil D'Afrique in Bamako, Mali, West Africa. Here I found the answers to the questions about my identity in the greetings from African brothers and sisters who accepted me as a 'brother who had come home.' This residency provided me with new artistic skills that informed my future artworks and gave me an understanding of deep African culture and animist belief systems and I returned feeling mentally stronger than when I left.

My quest to find the missing pieces of my cultural heritage took me to Jamaica, Africa and New York. This worthwhile experience that allowed me to return to the

UK and cope with micro/macro aggressions and institutional racism I have to cope with as a Black professional. I was then able to identify and meet the needs of a marginalised group of men that the education system had failed in my role as LDD coordinator at the local prison. In addition to this because of my sound practice and quality first teaching, along with the training I provided from teachers and prison officers, I was able to challenge negative stereotypes and hopefully making the navigation of this institutionally racist environment easier for the next Black professional.

Many tell me that we live in a post-racial society; especially now that the United States has a Black president, so why do I make race an issue? This is far from the truth in my professional experiences and I would argue that this is a social fantasy that soothes White guilt and only serves to suppress the black voice by rendering us mute and fits the Lacanian modes of fantasy filling the void of desire, as fantasy speaks to the symbolic it oppresses. Freire describes the phenomenon of “culture of silence,” as where the marginalised and oppressed are rendered silent due to an ignorance and lethargy as a direct consequence of economic, social and political domination.” He also makes it clear that education is a powerful tool to maintain this culture of silence (Onibada, 2016).

From this reflective account of my professionalism it is clear that issues of identity and race continue to dominate my professional career as I challenge negative perceptions of Blackness in education by continuing to be a high performing conscientious Rastafarian in education. Therefore, failing to meet teaching standards is not an option as I am always representing the black community and I

have a responsibility to other black professionals and a lost generation who are at the behest of the White curriculum.

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