

Diversifying the curriculum, a perspective

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Currently, I work in a large London primary school as an Assistant Headteacher. I am a champion for, and have worked extensively on, equality education and children's rights. We are in a great time of momentum in advocating for racial justice in education. I want to see a curriculum that reflects all the children and families we serve so that there is an inherent sense of identity and belonging.

Introduction

This article aims to shed light on the current situation with regard to race relations in education and diversifying the curriculum. Is diversifying it enough? Considering key documents and events, the article outlines what can be done in order for diversification of the curriculum to take place, or even before it takes place. I offer a perspective on celebrating and appreciating the pupils and staff we serve, rather than 'tolerating' each other. In essence, diversity needs to go mainstream.

In May 2020, George Floyd was brutally murdered, and the world was watching. His death sparked a global movement for change, not just for equality but also for equity of outcomes for Black people and people of colour—the global majority¹.

In the UK, over 92% of Headteachers are White (DfE, 2021) serving a nationally diverse population. Before even thinking about diversifying, or indeed decolonising

¹ The phrase 'global majority' references people who are Black, Asian, Indigenous/Aboriginal, Pacific Islander and other mixed heritage groups who are often labelled 'ethnic minorities' but collectively represent 80% of the world's population.

the curriculum, there has to be groundwork done in so far as personal reflection for unconscious bias across educational institutions as a whole and for practitioners individually. Time, hard work and commitment are needed to address issues of bias towards the global ethnic majority here in the UK, other disadvantaged groups and those belonging to protected characteristics. Race relations are at a pivotal point in education. Addressing biases is vital to ensuring at least a reasonable understanding of, and appreciation for, all people—and it is about time. By addressing unconscious biases and diversifying the curriculum, education can create a culture of belonging where each individual is celebrated for who they are, rather than being tolerated.

A call for change

It is not enough to say that there are ‘negative calls for decolonising the curriculum’ (Sewell, 2021). No longer can racism be tolerated. No longer can discrimination go unnoticed. No longer can micro-aggressions go unchallenged. Protected characteristics are protected for a reason- they safeguard who we are, our very core of being. Being protected by law carries weight and should be upheld.

How will each child leave school better than when they came? What ‘suitcase’ of learning will they leave with, having spent years in education, ready to travel the world with? How does a child of faith feel represented in the curriculum, for example? What about those from a disadvantaged background? A one-parent family? Those with same-sex parents? How does the curriculum seek to represent the broader population of Britain in all its glory of cultures, ethnicities, traditions, languages and families? Where do children belong? How do educational settings foster a sense of belonging that sees children and young people feel completely at home and at peace with who they are to erase the question of, ‘Where are you from?’ Or worse in response to ‘I was born here’, ‘No but where are you really from?’ In order to demonstrate that we, as practitioners value our learners, the curriculum needs to be ‘truly national’ (Alexander et al. 2015).

The current picture

Some schemes have already sought to address the issue of wider representation, such as the Jigsaw PSHE scheme (2021) and the Discovery RE (2021) programme. In their provision, they offer examples of different families and scenarios that are inclusive of wider society. Some schools are already making headway by creating their own learning journeys for children and young people. They offer urban adventure curricula, for example, and use the new [EYFS] reforms as a basis by which to advance already good practice with a specific focus on what exactly they want children to experience and achieve in order that they become well-rounded individuals, including talking about race. One example of this is Julien Grenier's extensive work on curricular goals which see children learning to sew a stitch, ride a balance bike and bake a bread roll in Nursery. All aspirational, real-life outcomes for children, no matter their race, background or socio-economic class. On the face of it, there seems no link to race. However, by setting the bar high for all children at the same time, education is, in fact, providing an equality-first experience for our young ones where no learner is left behind.

Consideration of history

The National Curriculum of 1999 (Key Stages One and Two) sought to allow,

'schools to meet the individual learning needs of pupils and to develop a distinctive character and ethos rooted in their local communities,' (1999, pp.12).

Then came the (Primary) National Curriculum of 2014 which called for a curriculum that was *'balanced and broadly based'* (2013, pp.5) promoting the development of the whole child and where teachers were to *'take account of their duties'* (pp.8) where protected characteristics were concerned. The difficulty is, there are so many unconscious biases at play that even before a diverse curriculum can be devised, attitudes and unconscious biases must be addressed in the first instance as part of initial teacher-training and as part of the wider continuing professional development provision in schools.

The murder of Stephen Lawrence in April 1993 sparked a national debate around race and the impact of structural and institutional racism here in the UK, namely in the police force. As part of its findings, the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report (1999),

stated that education should value cultural diversity and prevent racism 'in order better to reflect the needs of a diverse society' (Macpherson Report, 1999 pp. 382).

With a curriculum that spans British history across both primary and secondary phases, the representation of a generation of Commonwealth workers, including the Windrush generation, who came to help re-build our country post war is barely, if at all, represented. The 'broad and balanced' curriculum is one of a vastly colonial view, rather than the narratives of those enslaved as well as those who enslaved others. The same is true for the British rule in India and the impact for Indian citizens and the thousands of soldiers of colour from the Commonwealth who fought for Britain in the Second World War. There is gross under-representation of people of colour and their significant contribution to the British Empire as a whole.

Bringing education into the 21st century

More than twenty-eight years on from Stephen Lawrence and with the brutal murder of George Floyd on 25th May 2020, there is now widespread debate in education once again about the curriculum on offer and how to diversify it. But is diversifying it enough? It seems that colonial attitudes need to be addressed perhaps before diversifying the curriculum. Tackling unconscious (or even conscious) bias, white privilege, micro-aggressions and direct racism may come to be more effective, in other words, decolonising attitudes before decolonising the curriculum.

In the book, 'I Belong Here, A Journey Along the Backbone of Britain', the author writes openly about belonging and the 'deep loneliness and isolation that can affect mental health' without that sense of belonging (Sethi, 2021). This is in reflective reference to a racist attack she suffered in public as well as countless micro-aggressions. Deeply engrained and entrenched racist attitudes need to be challenged. Micro-aggressions need to be challenged. Why? Because it is the right thing to do. The book weaves a narrative that calls for the work needed to be done in order to address micro-aggressions and the wider, long-lasting impact these have on those individuals who suffer them. Equality is everybody's responsibility.

Imagine how children feel when they do not see themselves reflected in the curriculum- in books and resources, in texts and images, in the learning. There is a

deep cavity indeed for children and families of colour. Despite being a global ethnic majority, their experience of the curriculum is all too often white Eurocentric; more specifically that of white, middle-class men, 'male, pale and stale voices that need to be banished' (Sperring, 2020 pp. 3).

In order to foster a deep sense of belonging in children, the curriculum needs to address issues of race, in the first instance, as well as other protected characteristics more widely. We are living in a multi-national society with a vast array of languages, cultures and traditions. Even in areas of which can possibly be described as mono-ethnic, there still needs to be a national educational commitment to addressing the racial discord that currently exists. Difference should be both appreciated and celebrated. It is not enough to simply 'tolerate' other faiths, traditions, beliefs, cultures, customs or backgrounds. Tolerance is such a low bar.

The Black Curriculum Report (Arday,2021) highlights the drawbacks of the current curriculum, more specifically the history curriculum, which distinctly omits Black history, '*in favour of a dominant White, Eurocentric curriculum, one that fails to reflect our multi-ethnic and broadly diverse society.*' (pp.4). It goes further to make several recommendations, in more detail than the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report, for example:

'conventions of Britishness will always require reconceptualising to incorporate all of our histories and stories. Our curriculum requires an acknowledgement of the ethnic, cultural and religious diversity that comprises the tapestry of the British landscape and the varying identities associated within this.' (pp.5)

What it calls for is an evaluation of the curriculum to include Black history in order that there be, '*greater social cohesion and acceptance of racial and ethnic difference*' (pp.4).

By offering a 'broad and balanced' curriculum that is tailored to the demographics of the school population, you are reinforcing a deep sense of identity and belonging. Children and young people will feel seen, valued and understood for who they are, not just as individuals, but as a part of their communities. How empowering for our children and young people of today!

Rather than continuing the old-fashioned approach of British history, we should be teaching children and young people to be critical thinkers, to assess and appraise the evidence and different perspectives so that they can come to their own conclusions. No longer is it adequate enough to have diversity days or Black history month; to teach just one perspective. People of colour do not just exist for one day or one month of the year. There are countless scientists, historians and academics of colour who have made huge contributions to society as we know it. For example, although Thomas Edison may have invented the lightbulb as we know it, Lewis H. Latimer made a considerable contribution towards this. However, in those days it was rare for a person of colour to be attributed with such distinguished achievement. Another example is Wangari Maathai, Nobel Peace Prize laureate, known for her environmental activism in Kenya, 'It's the little things that citizens do. That's what will make the difference. My little thing is planting trees.' (Wilson, 2018). Where are they in the national curriculum?

In the Oxford Learner's Dictionary, 'national' is defined as 'connected with a particular nation; shared by a whole nation' (Oxford Learner's Dictionary). If education seeks to indeed connect the nation, and if it wants education to be a shared experience as a nation, then there is more work to be done. Diversity needs to go mainstream.

Young people need to know that who they are makes a difference. Not who they are because of an out-of-date system that continues to advance the privileged few, rather, who they are without the labels that are thrust upon them. They are not their labels. They are 'humxns'² (Ricketts, 2021) who make a valid and significant contribution every day. Diversifying the curriculum should reflect this. Decolonising attitudes is the right thing to do- creating safe spaces to open up dialogue, offering long-term quality staff training, enriching the curriculum with a broader representation of different communities, making equality training mandatory for initial teacher training.

Data from the Department of Education shows that 92.7 per cent of headteachers and 89.7 per cent of deputy and assistant headteachers in the UK are white (DfE,

² Humxn is the gender-neutral term for human. *Urban Dictionary: humxn* (2021) *Urban Dictionar*. Available at: <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=humxn>.

2021). These figures show that all-white leadership teams run the majority of schools in the country, which is not necessarily reflective of the communities they serve, or even our nation as a whole.

More needs to be done to actively recruit and retain professionals from ethnically diverse groups. For example, anonymising applications for name, age, gender and university to name a few categories; randomising responses to scenario questions and eliminating the personal statement response so that colleagues can show what they would do as opposed to what they have done, thereby showing their potential against their experience and expertise, skills and qualifications.

Conclusion

These are just a few starting points. Essentially, good, quality equality work means hard work. It means making the uncomfortable comfortable. It means braving being vulnerable. It means addressing racism head on so that attitudes can change, as well as behaviours. 'In this world there is room for everyone' (Chaplin, 1940).

Children should leave with a rich tapestry woven from learning and experiences that celebrate who they are, that give them every chance of further success in life, that elevate them in their sense of self-worth and identity. When a child asks, 'Where do I belong?' you can confidently say, 'Here.'

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