Decolonising education: The complex positionalities of Black secondary school teachers in the UK and the tensions, contradictions and expectations they face

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Introduction

This study was motivated by my personal experience as a Black racialised teacher and informal conversations with peers during my training and prior to leaving the profession. It is widely known that teachers leave the profession at greater rates than, for example, nurses or police officers, however, reports into teacher retention do not explicitly offer a breakdown of these statistics by ethnicity (Worth et al, 2018). Gov.UK statistics reveal that in 2018, 85.9% of teachers in the UK were from White British backgrounds and 92.9% of all headteachers were also from this demographic (DfE, 2020). Anecdotal evidence suggests that Black student-teachers are more likely to withdraw from teacher training programmes than their white counterparts and are more likely to leave the career early. The focus of this study is decolonising education, it is the backdrop against which I will analyse the complex positionalities of Black secondary school teachers in the UK that may give insight into retention rates, while also considering the alignment between decolonisation and anti-racism ventures.

In recent years, the call to decolonise universities has gained traction, from the 'Rhodes must fall' movement of the University of Cape Town to the UK's National Union of Students (NUS) 'Why is my curriculum white?' campaign, both instigated in

2015. These interventions built upon earlier movements concerned by the lack of representation of Black history in the National Curriculum and the elitism of the university. All these movements sought to transform the terms upon which education exists, the purpose of knowledge and its distribution, and its pedagogical praxis (Bhambra, Gebrial & Nisancioglu, 2018).

Context

The data collection period coincided with the murder of George Floyd, an unarmed African American man, at the hands of the Minneapolis police. The murder was captured on video causing global outrage and inciting Black Lives Matter protests across the world (Aranti, 2020). These protests had fervour and urgency which exceeded the initial Black Lives Matter movement of 2016. The protests spoke not only to police brutality but to the atrocities committed against the Black community and people of colour historically. Statues of colonial dignitaries and stakeholders in the slave trade were defaced or toppled, most notably, the Edward Colston statue in Bristol which was cast into the river Avon (Wall, 2020). The discourse around 'decolonisation' and 'whiteness' was brought to the mainstream, and many who had previously been unmoved by anti-racist activism were now seemingly paying heed. Bhambra, Gebrial & Nisancioglu (2018) explain how the decolonising movement deviates from the path taken by other forms of anti-racist campaigning. Amidst a myriad of wide-ranging definitions and interpretations, to 'decolonise' denotes two key elements for the authors. Firstly, a mentality that resituates colonialism, empire, and racism as pivotal in founding our modern society, despite their systematic concealment. Secondly, the suggestion of alternatives to our current ways of considering the world, knowledge, political praxis, and governmentality. It requires profound unlearning from everyone and troubles deep-seated precepts.

Black teachers' positioning in anti-racism and decolonising efforts

Haque & Elliott (2019) found that Black and minority ethnic teachers experience barriers to promotion and career progression, and feel undervalued, isolated, and unsupported. Teachers felt overburdened and demoralised and resented being given stereotypical responsibilities like leading Black History Month. Black teachers face a racist curriculum, epistemic violence, racist colleagues, unenforced discrimination

policies, and the complexities that come with being Black in a white normative space. Joseph-Salisbury (2020) investigates several factors which must be transformed to unroot the 'deeply embedded' racism within our school system. Though many teachers have found innovative ways to incorporate diverse material into the widely rebuked National Curriculum where possible, it is generally thought the curriculum is too restrictive for these practices to compensate for the disparities. The curriculum is tied to exam boards and textbooks, whose problematic content may go unnoticed by teachers lacking racial literacy – the knowledge and awareness to address race and racism (Twine, 2004). This is exemplified by the racist stereotypes perpetuated in the Hodder Education GCSE Sociology textbook which was the focus of controversy due to a passage that stated that Caribbean families are likely to have absentee fathers and that Black families in which both parents are present are usually unmarried cohabitants and reproduce traditional patriarchal divisions of labour (Badshah, 2018). Similarly, AQA's GCSE Psychology textbook was withdrawn due to its use of a racist image depicting Black people as cannibals (Roberts, 2020).

The desire to be a role model has featured heavily in studies of Black teachers in the UK as motivation for entering the field (Carrington et al, 2000, Maylor, 2009, Joseph-Salisbury, 2020). Yet, Joseph-Salisbury (2020) cautions that recruiting more Black staff should not be considered a solution to issues of deep-seated institutional racism in educational settings. Such ideas place the burden on individual Black staff members and free white faculty of their duty when anti-racism is the job of everyone. Sara Ahmed (2009) illustrates how diversity initiatives can often be described as '*a politics of feeling good*', allowing people to feel something is being done to address social and racial injustice without attacking the root of the issue. As is explored by Puwar (2004) who criticises the fact the number of Black and Asian bodies in institutional spaces is used to signpost structural progressive change. Puwar's in-depth exploration of the cautious reception given to Black and Asian professionals exposes the whiteness embedded in these institutions. Diversity initiatives may have a redeeming feature as they help get racialised bodies into spaces where they might affect change (Ahmed, 2009, Mirza, 2017).

There can, however, be a personal cost involved in affecting change. Teachers whose cultural background differs from the dominant white cultural majority are often

compelled to respond to situations imposed on them by the institution. Due to their race and ethnicity, as they are singled out for certain tasks. Padilla (1994) terms this 'cultural taxation' and it takes several forms. Firstly, being called upon to lead in 'diversity' issues and educate individuals from the majority group without remuneration or recognition for the added responsibility. Being invited to serve on diversity committees that become stagnated by the same recommendations being reiterated without any real structural change happening. Finally, the expectation to serve as a liaison between the institution and the community, as an interpreter or to translate documents. These activities, from which their white counterparts are exempted are often engaged in out of a sense of 'cultural obligation', but can be emotionally draining, leaving one at risk of burnout. This burnout heightens the risk of early-career departure, depriving the following generations of racially or culturally minoritised students of their mentorship (Padilla, 1994).

Findings and discussion

Williams (2018) found that the stories of Black teachers can be instrumental in challenging the structures that keep education white. Black teachers can bring a deep understanding of racism and racialised identities having experienced it themselves, by understanding and appreciating communities that have historically supported Black students who have been neglected by the white world. Nearly all the teachers I interviewed believed Black teachers are more likely to detect misrepresentation in the curriculum and supporting material. This comes not only from experiences as a teacher but through remembering their own confrontations with racism as a Black child going through the UK education system. Kohli's (2009) study of women of colour teachers found that their personal experiences with racism in their own education - slurs from peers, cultural invisibility in the curriculum, the attitudes, and actions of school staff, informed their observation of racism in schools.

One participant had vast amounts of teaching experience that spanned many subjects and educational settings, including prisons. He felt his presence as a Black teacher in a space where Blackness was associated with criminality challenged the assumptions held by the people he encountered there. He was also dispelling misconceptions about Black men by reaching into the community through the families of the learners. It is these experiences that he believes have the most power to affect change. While the

positive effects of his presence in these various settings over the years seem indisputable, he suffered many knocks along the way to facilitate the anti-racist learning of those around him. Gail Lewis (2017) speaks of 'presence', that is, occupying space as a racialised person. It can cause conflict between identity and otherness and an imbalance between self-perception and being perceived. By withstanding everyday racism in his workplaces to usher in change, his own wellbeing was jeopardised. The teachers of colour in Pizarro & Kohli (2018) disclosed that they felt immense responsibility to create educational environments where students of colour could thrive. This often meant challenging and even striving to replace dominant paradigms while simultaneously being on alert for the next racist encounter with a colleague and pressure to be hypervigilant in their work to protect themselves from unwarranted critique. This constant stress leads teachers to question themselves, lose resilience and leave the profession. Black teachers expend inordinate amounts of emotional labour in unsupportive school environments when tackling issues of race and racism. Emotional labour can be understood as the strain caused by friction between genuine emotions and those that one's job requires one to express or suppress (Kinman, Way & Strange, 2011).

Black teachers not only experience tension between their own values and the values put forward by the curriculum but also tension between preparing students for exams and managing the hidden curriculum. Dickar (2008) found that Black teachers experience tensions between their role as an educator and their racial identity. Teachers in their study expressed the significance of solidarity and advocacy with Black students but that this was also a source of conflict. This tension was particularly resonant for one sociology teacher I interviewed, who felt teaching the modules which examined the ethnic differences in educational achievement conflicted with her desire to cultivate high aspirations in her Black students. She expressed that this tension made her question being a teacher. Yet she described how her presence in the classroom contradicted the stereotypes of her demographic put forward by the subject specification. This did not go unnoticed and caused students to query categorical class definitions and assumptions about racial groups. Other participants found that this tension coupled with the overt racism from learners and colleagues created an oppressive environment. In Pabon's (2016) study Black teachers described having little decision-making power over what they taught and felt the suggested material was

not helping students learn. Drawing parallels between their own educational experiences and that of their students prompted the realisation that their teachers had taught irrelevant, decontextualized material. They, therefore, did not feel comfortable being complicit in perpetuating this cycle. Pabon believes this makes teachers become 'schooled out'. Teachers feel pressured to change their practices and material to fit standardised curricula and pedagogies and are systematically pushed out of the classroom as they express dissatisfaction with the curriculum they are compelled to teach and the constraints on the ways they must teach it. Despite the emphasis on practice and the classroom techniques utilised by Black teachers, all teachers I interviewed reported that wider societal changes would need to happen to reinforce any change in the curriculum. A decolonial rehaul of the curriculum would be one step needed in affecting change. One participant highlighted the fact that many entrants to teaching courses come from homogeneously white backgrounds and feared that even if the curriculum were to be decolonised, many of the educators teaching it would have a limited perspective on the sociohistorical context. Gillborn (2006) argues that anti-racism work that operates at only school level, however important, is alone not enough to determine how students from minoritised groups experience school. Gillborn fears we are at risk of 'tinkering' within the system and losing sight of the societal forces sustaining these inequalities.

Conclusion

The main aim of this study was to use the narratives of Black secondary school teachers in the UK to explore the tensions, contradictions, and expectations they face. I wanted to understand where Black teachers are positioned in decolonising education movements and anti-racist ventures. I found the work expected of them comes from external forces but also a sense of moral obligation to Black students and students of colour. Being minoritised among staff meant the teachers felt at times that this was solely their responsibility, all the teachers in this study had experienced being the only Black teacher in a school. Their narratives show they challenge misconceptions about Blackness through their presence and in their practice, they are attuned to the needs of Black students by drawing on their own confrontations with racism and remembering their educational experiences. They see the anti-racism work that needs to be done but it can be taxing emotionally. Teachers sometimes modified their subjects to encourage critical consciousness, but time restraints and exam preparation impede

incorporating othered perspectives. The curriculum needs to reflect the diverse classrooms of the UK, more accurately reflect history, and move away from relying only on Eurocentric intelligence. Black teachers can bring a lot to the profession and work needs to be done to address the structural barriers faced in their careers. Black teachers are combatting post-racial, colour-blind ideals by encouraging Black young people to be proud of their culture. If we do not ensure the wellbeing of Black teachers as part of decoloniality and anti-racism work in school, we risk losing members of staff with invaluable insight.

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