

If education research isn't embracing equity and social and environmental justice, then what's the point?

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"We must mobilise everything we have in terms of intellectual resources in order to understand what keeps making the lives we live and the societies we live in, profoundly and deeply anti-humane." - Professor Stuart Hall (Stuart Hall Foundation, 2021)

Children in the UK are traumatised. The COVID-19 health emergency has suddenly reconfigured their lives, learning and relationships. Global perspectives continue to shift with protests urgently calling for Black lives to matter (Buettner, 2020) and the climate and ecological catastrophes resonate more fully across society every year. Yet

within this extreme turbulence and uncertainty, how focused are higher education institutions and researchers on the realities of children's experiences and in particular on the inequalities faced by children from minoritised communities? Is education research, its structures, funding and methodologies genuinely addressing the combined issues of equity, social and environmental justice that today's children will navigate as adults in their futures?

Events and encounters over recent decades have led me to these questions. However, four moments of learning remain sharply in focus as I consider the research required to inform equitable, sustainable and racially just repair and recovery within education. Firstly, as my teacher training degree concluded in the early 1990s, amidst the decline of investment in state education, it became clear that I would enter a system that was addressing its failures by extending the standardised national curriculum and testing regimes. My response was to write a final degree thesis exploring approaches to deschooling, deregulation and academic and community knowledge interconnectedness. If the Education Reform Act of 1988 had formalised a traditional educational narrative (Sheldon, 2012:12) then in my mind, systemic transformation seemed essential to counter the politically motivated undermining of creative, critical and community thinking as well as of teachers' skills and experience (Abrams, 2011). What real use were four years of university teacher training that had not prepared me for the social inequalities of the education system, or for the family counselling, mediation and restorative justice work I would need to take on just to survive several weeks of a year 5 and 6 teaching placement. At one estate primary school in Islington, the head teacher was accustomed to calling the police when physical battles between on edge parents broke out. Older siblings dealt drugs next to the school gates and the BNP (British National Party) lurking in the shadows of Old Street filled me and my pupils, with a deep sense of unease. Pre-existing negative factors including discrimination, exclusion, poverty, malnutrition and unmet health, housing, and employment needs (Zhang, *et al.* 2020), were backdrops to children's stifled expectations, and growing anger, and anxiety that no amount of creative pupil centred lesson planning could ever hope to address.

In drafting a degree thesis on deschooling, I was responding to fraught conversations with other trainee teachers. These discussions revolved around the grating home/school relationships in which trust was low, tensions high and neutral ground

hard to find. As much as we valued education and felt committed to pedagogy and the energy in our classrooms, we recognised the futility of trying to align a 'one size fits all' national curriculum with the binding lives of so many of our students. We even dreamt of planning an escape with our classes away from the estate for a day trip to the hills or coast where we could all stretch out and breathe. How could years of study at two teacher-training colleges have omitted any scrutiny of the social and racial injustices reinforced by an education system that failed so many children year after year? My deschooling convictions were informed by Illich (1973) and questioned, "What kinds of things and people might learners want to be in contact with in order to learn?" (Illich, 1973: 79). As a student, I was critical of the narrowing national curriculum, the first redraft of which "sacrificed a focus on global interconnection, Empire, colonisation and slavery under the guise of offering teachers 'greater freedom' (Lidher, 2020 9). As the decades have played out, it is only now that I fully recognise how state education structures have been engineered to "promote capitalism and the interests and values of the ruling class in getting pupils work-ready" (McKenzie, 2001:48-49). In my qualifying year as a teacher, I was not alone in feeling tense, frustrated, and unprepared for a system of growing rigidity and inequality.

A second reason to call for education research to centre equity, social and environmental justice, relates to an initial experience of full-time teaching. My first NQT (Newly Qualified Teachers) position delivered me squarely into a new town primary school in Hertfordshire where I had grown up. Even though I knew this town well and had attended similar predominantly white schools throughout my own childhood, I mistakenly imagined that joining the teaching profession would change something, that a good degree, enthusiasm and professionalism left no space for the ideology and structures of racism. However, space did exist for a polite and insipid form of discrimination that never quite met you face on but was impossible to shake off. Theories such as the 'phenomenology of whiteness' (Ahmed 2007) were unheard of. This was an era of colour blindness and cloying and pervasive racism without racists (Lewis, 2004:637). That September, I became 'Miss' to a Year 1 and 2 class of 31 pupils including seven with recognised SEN (Special Educational Needs). Their complex behaviours went far beyond the transactional analysis and 'economy of strokes' (Steiner 2003) fleetingly touched upon during teacher training. NQT guides assumed that resources and support were forthcoming. They were not. Without these,

I built a 3D 'Poet Tree' in the corner of our classroom to sit beneath and share our own creations. We wheeled large construction fantasy rockets into 'show and tell' assemblies, rather than the usual triple mounted renditions of modern art. I meditated with the class at story time and made kites in maths lessons. We grew to know and like each other, not easy for children who, had endured four temporary teachers in the previous year and were stuck in a room on the edge of the school where everything froze during winter. Still, any small gains seemed overshadowed by the failures of carefully planned and differentiated lessons. I was overwhelmed. I could not sleep at night. Worst of all were the encounters with other teaching staff. Walking into the staff room felt glacial. Nothing came easily, not advice, resources, or conversation. When a room full of white colleagues ignore you as you enter, when you know you will have to instigate every friendly encounter, when requests go ignored or are deflected, you eventually become quiet. The isolation seeped in through my body. It erupted causing months of agonising sinusitis. My break time preference became hiding in the windowless cupboard with Elsie, the caretaker, sipping milky tea from one of her mugs, occasionally with Hobnob biscuits or cake. Teacher training had certainly not prepared me for the erasure of confidence through subtle racial weathering, through "micro insults, micro invalidations and other forms of covert racism" (Busby, 2020 p. 1). At the time, I had no name for what was happening. At the time, I simply felt defeated. Decades later, reports such as that by Haque & Elliott (2017) investigating the impact of racism on BME (Black Minority Ethnic) teachers, requires us to ask if education research has advanced to help schools address teacher discrimination based on race. It has become increasingly difficult to ignore the persistent attachment of predominantly white researchers and their institutions, to the colonial, socially constructed terms of race, ethnicity and ancestry within research (Ahmadzadeh, 2020). We are still stuck it seems, with racism that is "historically embedded in the foundations of all systems and institutions within which we work" (Hatch 2020).

A third reason to advocate for the transformation of policy that informs education research and current higher education inequities that inhibit innovation (Papatsiba & Cohen, 2020) has more to do with being a parent. I have developed an acute awareness of the impacts on teaching and learning of the school setting, including the social, relational and physical environments. Environmental degradation and the exposure of many children to ecological hazards, including pollution, have become the

markers of entrenched deprivation (Zhang, et al. 2020). Poor quality school and local environments lacking in the green spaces that promote physical and mental health, are predominantly experienced by minoritised populations and have been highlighted as real concerns in terms of children's wellbeing during the Covid-19 pandemic (McNeil, *et al.* 2020).

A school's social and relational environments are equally important. I am the mother of four brown children. I have attended hundreds of parents' evenings, school plays and concerts, fetes, cake sales, PTA meetings and consultations, each time with uneasiness. 'Don't arrive too early or too late. Will anyone sit next to me or speak to me? How much do I have to reveal about myself for teachers not to speak down to me? Why do I feel useless even when I'm invited to help serve drinks at the sports day?' So much uncertainty and unease even before a word is spoken about any of the children. How did they navigate spaces of non-belonging? Despite the gentle friendship of several parents at each school, all white, we never once spoke together about keeping our children safe from subtle pupil or teacher instigated racial bullying. Were they ever anxious that their sons or daughters would need to work twice as hard as other children to be noticed? Was I the only parent who had to drag her large white husband into the head teacher's office to complain on occasions, because Deputy Head Teachers and even pastoral staff (all white) seemed to pay more attention to any concerns with him sat glumly in room? A year 7 term two full of anguish and defeat, finally ended as I removed one son from a secondary school where his sense of being unable to stand up for a smaller white friend for fear of racist reprisals, sunk him into such depression that I feared I would lose him altogether. Where could any of this be spoken about? Certainly not in the predominantly white education settings, where even today people quietly question if such experiences could possibly be real and white psychologists and counsellors feel ill equipped to tackle racial bullying head on. Educational theories had no perspectives on how the racialised teacher might acknowledge and respond to the adverse childhood experiences of racially traumatised students and their parents. Even as one of those parents, who had absorbed the distress of every school encounter over so many years, as a teacher I still felt immobilised by my own isolation and inability to reach out.

So then, to my final motive for caring deeply about meaningful and connected education research that courageously interrogates the inequitable design of education

policy, theories and practices. Today it is possible to refer to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) when tackling each type of discrimination in schools. However, in recent years the UN's Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights has commented that, in 2018 "almost a third of children in the United Kingdom were in poverty" (UN 2019, 16). In light of such findings, do research frameworks and methodologies exist that fully examine whole school accountability to equity, social and environmental justice as combined elements? Since March 2020, my focus on these questions has become a journey of discovery and personal reflection. Though confined to a home workspace, I have nevertheless, travelled virtually to research and environmental conferences and meetings and have facilitated online spaces that interrogate these themes. This has been a time for exploration, for connecting with the collective wisdom and a praxis of Black feminist scholarly activism. I have been energised by encounters with the academic and research work of Sadhvi Dar, Nike Jonah, Deborah Brewis (TCCE 2021a), Michele Berger, Kecia Thomas, Erinma Ochu and Ro Averin (TCCE 2021b) as well as the decolonised and intersectional teachings of Angela Davis (Davis, 2015), bell hooks (hooks, 1981) and Bryan *et al* (2018) among others. The discussions and encounters have been a respite from that experience of being "simultaneously hypervisible and invisible" within the academy (Lander & Santoro, 2017). They have even inspired my own speculative writing (Rutter, 2021) that is also anti-racist. Clearly, the eradication of institutional and structural racism still requires ingenuity, new knowledge, collective approaches, determination and time (Fanon, 1963).

For many current academics of colour, there is a yearning for the freedom to follow their academic passion and develop their excellence rather than be systematically marginalised, overlooked or reduced to the sum of their protected characteristics (Rollock, 2019 & Rutter 2021a). For these women, and it is predominantly women, their work extends to addressing the unmet needs of marginalised undergraduate students trying not to fall into the attainment gap. Many teach, conduct research and support their institutions REF (Research Excellence Framework) and KEF (Knowledge Exchange Framework) while simultaneously leading on staff and community equality initiatives (Rollock, 2019). These are too often undervalued and poorly resourced. However, within the many small but vital and grounded initiatives that exist, new equitable theories of change are evolving. They include the Anti-Racist Educator organisation based in Scotland. This brings together students, teachers, parents,

academics and activists to build an education system that is equitable, free from racial injustice and critically engaged with issues of power, identity, and privilege (The Anti-Racist Educator 2021). The Centre for Identities and Social Justice at Goldsmiths University Department of Educational Studies supports research that examines the links between education and social inequality as well as investigating how teachers deal with racism in their practice (Centre for Identities and Social Justice, 2021). This extends to permanent exclusion and institutional prejudice. Both practices continue to disproportionately impact Black and ethnic minority children, who then also fall foul of the “pupil referral unit (PRU)-to-prison “pipeline” (New Statesman, 2020). At Leeds Beckett University, The Centre for Race Education and Decoloniality (CRED) is working with pre-service and in-service teachers to “challenge and disrupt everyday racism, racial inequality and systems of institutionalised whiteness” (CRED, 2021). The Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 2020) seem prevalent in this work, as does a commitment to “the lived experiences of people from Black and global majority groups” (CRED, 2021a). At De Montfort University, the work of the Stephen Lawrence Research Centre (2021) commemorates and memorialises Stephen Lawrence, who in 1993 aged just 18, was ‘unlawfully killed’ by five white youths. Although “the murder occurred outside school premises and hours, Ofsted (1996:51) records it as “a significant incident regarding education” (Page, 2020). The racist murder of Black teenager Stephen Lawrence, subsequently led to the 1999 Macpherson Report that concluded, “institutional racism ... exists both in the Metropolitan Police Service and in other Police Services and other institutions countrywide” (Macpherson *et al.*, 1999).

Here then, are the future organisational models for how to approach injustice in the education system, while simultaneously challenging power and privilege (Bhopal, 2018) even if underrepresentation of Black and racially minoritized leaders persists at senior management levels. However, just as one breath brings optimism the next leaves me broken hearted once again by the need to “Shine-A-Light in Memory of Dea-John Reid¹” (2021). This Black child could have been my son aged 14, asking the authorities for help, but who instead lost his life. The drip of trauma upon trauma

¹ Dea-John Reid was a Black teenager aged fourteen who was chased and stabbed to death 31st May 2021. It has been alleged that Reid was chased with racial insults hurled at him before being stabbed according to witnesses. Three teenagers and two adults, Michael Shields and Alvis Walk has been charged.

for communities of colour drowns the joy in our hearts and makes us draw our children closer as we re-coach them on how to survive. Hundreds of thousands have marched worldwide insisting that Black Lives Matter, but even during a pandemic and as national football teams protest against racism by taking the knee (Guardian, 2021), it seems that Black and Brown young people are not spared from racial profiling and brutalisation both in and out of school. What are the solutions that education research could be championing? I look to The Mending Room in Lambeth (2021). This collective provides a collaborative model in which passionate local community scholars, activist, educators and parents are coming together. They know what they need for their children. They understand and live the inequalities and disparities faced by families, and they feel the anguish of every child failed by an education system that has barely changed in over a hundred years. The Mending Room is proposing community led interventions that will create positive intergenerational impacts and legacies for young people. Their collective wisdom and understanding inspires meaningful responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, youth mental health and well-being needs as well as the uplifting of activist movements demanding sustainable and locally responsive educational repair and recovery. What are they calling for? Compassionate, anti-racist and trauma informed relationship building, seeded with cultural expertise, sensitivity and fluency rather than just competency (Crosby, Howell Thomas, 2018). YES! They are striding out for a social justice framework approach to education (McIntosh, 2019) and the support of young people that is holistic and imbued with secure attachment. Community cohesion and an end to discriminatory under resourcing of education are viewed as essential elements to seeding equitable, accessible and nurturing school environments that raise up the most marginalised and with them all of society. Now is the time for our research institutions to follow these leads and to act. To serve practical implications by listening to and amplifying the combined experiences and voices of teachers, parents, young people and communities of the past and present. This in addition to espousing established experience and evidence-based theory. Will education research and researchers become ingenious, courageous and compassionate enough to refocus resources and funding in support of education that embraces equity, social and environmental justice? If not, then really, what is the point?

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