

## **Are we frightened to discuss race and cultural differences in school?**

### **Potential deficiencies within the English National Curriculum**

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#### **Introduction**

In my very early teaching career (over 20 years ago) an upset 11-year-old student came to see me. He told me his friends were telling him he was Black (this was a discussion they were having together) but this was not the case. He claimed rather that when he was younger, he had been on holiday, became tanned and the tan never faded (he was mixed race). I am ashamed to say I remember not knowing what to do or say. I did not know how to discuss race with a student or how as a white, new and naïve teacher to navigate that conversation. What did I do? Shamefully, very little. The 'incident' has haunted me ever since and has led me to the discussion where this paper will examine why teachers (especially those early on in their career) may shy away from honest, open and frank dialogue about race and culture in schools. This paper will focus on the cultural discussion opportunities which currently exist within the formal, informal and hidden curricula, and will suggest ways in which future research should be undertaken to encourage and develop such conversations within a school environment.

#### **The Formal Curriculum**

The 1968 Race Relations Act sought to eliminate discrimination from public life (HM Government, 1968). The National Curriculum was introduced 20 years later (HM Government, 1988) so it could be considered that a wholly inclusive and integrated education system had been established where everyone was considered an equal - no matter their background or cultural heritage. But it seems this may not have been

achieved. In 2019, 33.9% of primary state school students were from Black or ethnic backgrounds<sup>1</sup>, 32.3% state secondary students and 'special school' Black and ethnic minority students made up 30.2% of the student population (Shankley *et al.*, 2020). With such diversity, experience and differing knowledge, it could be reasonable to assume that the English National Curriculum would allow teachers to embrace, discuss and expand on different cultures. It could also be sensible to assume that teachers could talk about and celebrate cultural differences and diversities with students, but it sadly seems not to be the case. The English National Curriculum appears to have narrowed in focus since 1988 to a point where in 2016, the Times Educational Supplement published an article highlighting that 'our curriculum is so narrow that it bores both pupils and teachers - and crushes creativity' (Harris, 2016). The English National Curriculum could be considered a list of subjects where schools have been encouraged to, through the competitive nature of league tables, focus their attention on achieving success in Standard Attainment Tests, GCSEs (including the introduction of the EBACC) and A' level results. In fact, Ofsted's Chief Inspector, Amanda Spielman wrote how 'good examination results' do not necessarily demonstrate that a student has received a high-quality education but potentially, if schools teach to exams, then students could be left with what she terms as a 'hollowed out and flimsy understanding' (Spielman, 2017). But where does this leave us with respect to discussions about race and culture? There seems only very limited scope or opportunity for this in the current English National Curriculum (2014). The opportunities which do exist for 'formal' discussion with students about race appear to be in two main key programmes of study – History and Citizenship. However, the History curriculum seems to be focused on key areas of development in Britain. Using Key Stage 3 (students aged 11 – 14) as a focus, topics within the curriculum suggest students should be taught:

- 'the development of the Church, state and society in Medieval Britain 1066-1509.'
- 'the development of Church, state and society in Britain 1509-1745.'
- 'ideas, political power, industry and empire: Britain, 1745-1901.'
- 'challenges for Britain, Europe and the wider world 1901 to the present day.'

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<sup>1</sup> Note: I choose not to use the acronym 'BAME' because I consider it could be deemed as derogatory, as it is dependent on the geographical area of its use.

- ‘a local history study.’
- ‘the study of an aspect or theme in British history that consolidates and extends pupils’ chronological knowledge from before 1066.’

(Department for Education, 2013b)

These topics within the History programmes of study appear to largely concentrate on the desire for Britain to learn about what could be considered its ‘empire’ or ‘Britishness’ and the importance of Britain having been a major colonial power, meaning that they highlight and potentially try to celebrate the historical domination (or colonialism) of Britain (Horvath, 1972).

The second area where the potential possibilities for discussion of race and culture might be exploited is within the Citizenship Programmes of Study which were introduced within the ‘new’ curriculum in 2013 (Department for Education, 2013a). Taking Key Stage 3 subject content only, the focus is on democratic processes and rules and laws of society. It offers an opportunity to explore how these are implemented and how ‘citizens work together to improve their communities’ (Department for Education, 2013a). Race, cultural identity or benefits of a multi-lingual, multi-faceted and diverse society appear to be underemphasized or ignored. These disregarded elements of the curriculum may result in difficulties for both teachers and students being able to discuss culture, identity and the contributions and benefits that everyone may bring to the classroom.

### **The Informal and Hidden Curricula**

The informal curriculum is a curriculum where there is no formal monitoring, nor is it prescribed at any level above the school system itself (McCaslin and Good, 2013). A contemporary example of the informal curriculum could be ‘after school clubs’, ‘breakfast clubs’ or ‘lunch clubs.’ The hidden curriculum is somewhat differing in that this is not consciously planned and is based on interactions between teachers and students to model desirable approaches and principles (Wren, 1999). Contemporary examples of the hidden curriculum may be considered as punctuality to lessons, possessing a ‘good’ work ethic or wearing the school uniform ‘correctly.’

In 2019, according to the British Government, 85.7% of all (known) state-funded school teachers were white British, as were 92.7% of all headteachers (GOV.UK, 2021). In contrast in 2019, 67% of secondary school children were classified as ‘White

British' with 31% as 'Minority Ethnic Pupils' (Department for Education, 2019a). With these statistics in mind, a challenge for white teachers and headteachers is presented. They need to recognise, thus appreciate the many ways in which Black and minority ethnic students could allow schools to become richer and more opulent environments. Put quite simply, if staff have difficulty in recognising student attributes, how could they embrace them? For example, in 2018, the Royal Historical Society reported the need for schools 'to reflect the full diversity of human histories' (Royal Historical Society, 2018). Without appreciating diversity, schools may (albeit potentially subconsciously) undervalue students from different cultures and discriminate against them. Students who are classified as having English as an Additional Language (EAL) make up 16.9% of the secondary school population (Department for Education, 2019b) but a report in 2014 noted a clustering of students considered EAL in bottom sets in all subjects (Arnot *et al.*, 2014). The findings of this report demonstrate that it was not student ability in those subjects that was being recognised but their English language skills. So, if a student were particularly talented at Maths (for example), they may still be placed into lower set groups because of their difficulties in understanding English. This subconscious behaviour of teachers and/or headteachers could be considered as being part of the hidden curriculum and is intertwined with other elements of the curriculum. A conscious behaviour change, where teachers and head teachers begin to recognise these failings is required otherwise the pathway to change and equality is potentially a never-ending one.

### **Teacher Training**

Teachers teach for a minimum of 190 days (in non - COVID times) during each school year (Long, 2019) and are expected to partake in up to five In-Service Training days (INSET) (Edapt, 2021). There are no set rules on topics for INSET days for schools and Local Authorities/Academies can decide for themselves what teachers do with the time (NASUWT, 2021). But if there is no direction, and as discussed above, headteachers/teachers do not necessarily realise that they are subconsciously discriminating against students from different ethnic minority backgrounds, it is unlikely that these issues will be given high priority. The Government provides very little support or guidance in dealing with ethnic and cultural differences of students, although in 2020 it did release a training package for teachers offering advice on how to teach 'relationships education' (for primary schools) and 'relationships and sex

education' (for secondary schools) as part of new statutory guidance (Department for Education, 2020). However, there seems to still be little advice, support or opportunity to enable teachers to know how to effectively teach students about different cultures, particularly when most teaching staff are white and may not know about any cultures other than their own. Staff may not have been given the skills to begin the conversation and when and how they should have it. Teachers may also find the dissemination of misinformation challenging because they could be worried that if they have not experienced something, it could be difficult for them to discuss with students. A similar situation could be when a male instructor teaches female students 'sex education' (and the other way around). To truly understand the perspective of being female when teachers have not experienced being female is a complex area to navigate through.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has demonstrated there are some difficulties with the current English National Curriculum regarding teaching about race, ethnicity and racism. It has established the gaps that exist within programmes of study regarding teaching and discussing different cultures with students. There seems to be missed opportunities to train teachers to embrace and celebrate the cultural differences between us, rather than shy away from them. Having now had the experience of many years of teaching, I would have dealt with the situation described in the introduction differently. I would have considered support and consulted with someone who maybe knew more about cultural diversity and racism than me and I would have talked to the student about the importance of his heritage and discussed this with his parents. Future research should consider how teachers and students should be supported to allow for open, frank discussion about culture and race and to acknowledge that there are variances in backgrounds, that is not only okay, but something to acknowledge and celebrate.

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