
Special issue: *Decolonising the School Curriculum*

Commentary

The rebirth of the call for antiracism in schools: learning from the past

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Abstract

A prominent feature of the Black Lives Matter protests following the murder of George Floyd has been the renewed call for schools to become antiracist. What can be learnt from past unsuccessful attempts to implement antiracist education? Specific critiques of the antiracist movement made by prominent academics such as Paul Gilroy are worth revisiting. Research also suggests that sections of White working-class students were alienated by antiracist strategies that were often clumsy and exclusive in their implementation. In relation to state initiatives, there has been a shift from antiracist or multicultural agendas to the forefronting of the teaching of British values in schools. It is within this context, with the catalyst of popular outrage at racial injustice, that calls for antiracist education are again being vocalised. This article suggests that a renewed form of antiracism might focus on integrating a pedagogy of educating for social justice, setting out to avoid the polarisation of racialised categories. Rather than espousing a limited and essentialising discourse of race, a reexamination of class relations could usefully be positioned within a reformulated and reimagined antiracism that offers a critique of systemic injustice to include a wider constituency than race alone.

Keywords antiracist education; White working class; intersectional; Black Lives Matter

Introduction

In this commentary for the special issue about 'Decolonising the school curriculum', I wish to locate my own experience having started my schooling in the UK in the early 1960s, with memories of a strong, often overt, emphasis on the UK's colonial past and the consequent implications for those, like myself, who were positioned as Other. As a child of colour with direct familial links to Ghana, this experience had a profound influence on how I see my place in the country which I have since refrained from unconditionally calling 'home'. The discourse that stems from the perspective of the coloniser, ideas of hegemonic Whiteness, and resulting epistemic violence towards people of colour, continues to impact on generations of children. Although current calls to decolonise the curriculum hold the promise of disrupting this process, the colonising world view is still prevalent in our school systems over 50 years after my own early experiences. My subsequent experiences as a student and then as an educator in the 1980s and early 1990s resulted in my becoming involved in the calls for antiracist practice to be implemented in schools in the UK. It is the positioning of this initial project of antiracism, regarding what lessons can be learnt from its failure to succeed, that I will discuss here.

Following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, and the Black Lives Matter movement protests, councils and local authorities are again declaring themselves to be 'antiracist' and over 660 schools have signed up to a 'diverse and anti-racist curriculum' (Batty et al., 2021).

With these renewed demands for antiracist education, it would be useful to consider how earlier antiracist initiatives were framed and implemented, and what can be learnt from some of their shortcomings. Decolonising the Western academy has been located as crucial antiracist work (Jivraj, 2020); as such, how can calls to decolonise the curriculum be set in a wider pedagogic context that responds to the schooling experience of marginalised students? Referencing Gilroy's (1992) forthright critique of the previous iteration of antiracism, this commentary will consider how calls to decolonise the curriculum can be incorporated in contemporary conceptions of antiracist education.

The context of resurgent calls for antiracist education

By the early 1990s, the notion of antiracism in education had been largely discredited (Gilroy, 1992), and most schools and local authorities were not keen to implement it (Gaine, 2000). Popular discourse was generally outraged by accounts of clumsy implementation of antiracism, citing urban myths, such as the banning of the singing of 'Baa Baa Black Sheep' in nursery schools (Nayak, 1999). As many schools today again mobilise around the idea of antiracism (Batty et al., 2021), it is useful to consider the way in which antiracism – a sentiment that seems to mean simply to do away with racism (Gilroy, 1992) – became a cipher for dictatorial edicts, which many saw as an affront to a 'common sense' understanding of what racism is (Raby, 2004). If antiracism can be understood as the pedagogic underpinning (Blakeney, 2005) to current calls to decolonise the curriculum (Jivraj, 2020), it may be useful to consider how it is positioned in the context of official discourse in the form of reports, inquiries and legislation, which have determined how UK schools have been mandated to understand and implement interventions around racial and cultural diversity.

The report of the Macdonald Inquiry's investigation of the circumstances surrounding the murder of 13-year-old Ahmed Ullah in 1986 by a White classmate in the playground of Burnage High School was highly critical of the headmaster's approach in implementing antiracism, describing it as an 'unmitigated disaster – achieving the opposite of what was intended' (Macdonald et al., 1989: 402). Although the report did not critique antiracism per se, but rather its poorly considered implementation at the school, its publication marked a moment in which antiracist initiatives in schools became discredited (Gaine, 2000: 69). Multicultural education, which had preceded antiracist education, focused on teaching about cultural differences, rather than teaching to directly explain and oppose racism. Such a multicultural approach had been endorsed by the Swann Report in 1985, which had set out to investigate the underachievement of minority ethnic students in British schools (DES, 1985). The antiracist critique of this multicultural approach argued that teaching about cultural differences did nothing to address the

consequences of a schooling system that reproduced the endemic racism of our social structures (Troyna, 1987; Richardson and Wood, 1999). The murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993, and the identified failure of the Metropolitan Police to investigate this properly, led eventually to the passing of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act (2000), which responded to the definition of institutional racism laid out in the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report (Macpherson, 1999). It is this Act that perhaps came closest to instituting an antiracist approach in British schools and in setting out to mitigate the impact of systemic racism on the experiences and attainment of minority ethnic students. However, this focus was not to last; the Race Relations (Amendment) Act (2000) was replaced by the Equality Act (2010), which marked a shift away from specific and singular concerns with race equality in the official remit of education policy. Since the passing of the Equality Act (2010), even the less politically charged notion of multiculturalism (in comparison with antiracism) was disparaged by the former prime minister, David Cameron (2011), in suggesting that the multiculturalism agenda had promoted 'non-British' values, and that this threatened national security. In place of multiculturalism and antiracism, the introduction of community cohesion may be understood as setting out to appease those offended by the notion of multiculturalism, as Thomas (2013: Slide 6) suggests: 'Post-2001 policy shift towards community cohesion and "integration" is partially a discursive acknowledgement that "multiculturalism" is an increasingly problematic policy term, especially for sections of the white majority.'

This notion of 'community cohesion' was first instituted following uprisings in northern towns in the summer of 2001, which were interpreted as being symptomatic of the marginalisation from mainstream society experienced by Asian youth (Cantle, 2001). The educational approach to teaching about why difference matters (Hall, 1997) can be seen to have shifted significantly from the promise signalled by the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report (Macpherson, 1999) of recognising deeply rooted racial injustice and its impact. Policy now dictates that schools must teach about Britishness, highlighting the supposedly 'British' (rather than universal) values of tolerance and fairness (Kundnani, 2007), and the suppression of both cultural difference and the notion of systemic oppression. The necessity of 'Promoting Fundamental British Values' in UK schools (DfE, 2014) was implemented by Michael Gove (then the education secretary) in 2014. In addition to teaching about British values, a new history curriculum was introduced to centre on aspects of Britain's past to nurture a sense of pride and 'Britishness' (DfE, 2014). We have arrived at a position in which schools are expected to present the best of British values in a reification of Britishness (Moncrieffe and Moncrieffe, 2017).

It is this context of a return to teaching an acceptance of hegemonic Britishness, which arguably is accompanied by an unspoken privileging of Whiteness (Malik, 1996), which current calls to decolonise the curriculum and to implement an antiracist educational perspective are setting out to disrupt.

Interrogating the language of race

Previous iterations of antiracism have tended to polarise people into race-based categories, enforcing a racialised distinction between victims and perpetrators of racism (Gilroy, 1992), eschewing nuance in favour of forcing complexities into knee-jerk rhetoric. As Audre Lorde (1984: 110) tells us, 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house'. We cannot therefore dismantle racism by using the very constructs (the language through which we imagine race) that legitimate racial difference. While 'race', as it operates socially, remains a determining social indicator of life chances and lived experiences, it has long been defunct as a biological construct (Ifekwunigwe, 1999). Thus, by invoking the rhetoric of 'race', antiracists already face complexity and contradiction. As Street (1987: 14) suggests, it is important 'not to give credence to the "pseudo-scientific" conceptual framework within which race is embedded in this society'. The tension then is in acknowledging the influence of racial positionings and the destructive ways in which racism operates both systemically and affectively, without essentialising racial difference. It is at this point of complexity in discussing 'race' that Gilroy's (1992) article, 'The end of antiracism', helps us to reconceptualise how we, as antiracists, can most usefully employ the idea of 'race'. Gilroy (1992: 50, emphasis added) critiques the former antiracist movement for these reasons:

For all its antipathy to the new racism of the New Right, the common-sense ideology of the antiracist movement has *also* drifted towards a belief in the *absolute nature* of ethnic categories and a strong sense of the *insurmountable* cultural and experiential division which, it is argued, are a feature of racial difference.

This critique is at the core of Gilroy's (1992) claims that the antiracist movement has essentialised racial difference, and thus lost its ability to understand the very process of racism, which has been to construct and legitimise the idea of embodied 'race'. In this way, the suggested reconceptualising of antiracism needs to refrain from reifying 'race'. Calls to decolonise the curriculum set out to deconstruct the racialisation process that made possible the projects of slavery, colonisation and neo-colonialism which were at the heart of the UK's industrial expansion and which continue in the imagined significance of 'race' to this day.

Antiracist pedagogy must be inclusive

The project of decolonising the curriculum in the context of antiracist education is necessarily political education (Mansfield and Kehoe, 1994) in addressing the specific task of teaching about the systems of inequality within our social system, and as such it will necessarily encounter resistance:

The decolonizing curriculum is invested in addressing conversations about oppression, racism, and social justice. Yet decolonizing practices also recognize the difficulties of promoting a critical curriculum since schools, and society in general, resist knowledge that may focus on subaltern or marginalized epistemologies. (Subedi, 2013: 638)

The Macdonald Inquiry referenced above shows just how fragile and deeply divisive an antiracist approach can be, if the wider school community is fractured regarding its implementation (Macdonald et al., 1989). Reticence and lack of confidence from teachers and parents need to be addressed in training and preparation in those schools which are embracing the call to decolonise their curriculums or to become antiracist establishments. This training and preparation need to be carefully framed, ensuring that they address the fear and distrust that many teachers have in both accepting the principles of antiracism and in incorporating its principles into their classroom practice (Asare, 2009).

Previous implementation of antiracist education in the 1980s and 1990s opened the conceptual space for a backlash from some teachers, as well as from sections of White working-class students and their families, who may understandably not have identified with being recipients of White privilege, and who may themselves have felt alienated within the schooling system (Reay, 2006). For example, Cockburn (2007: 553) suggests that White lower-middle-class young adults are seen to be attracted to far-right politics, partly, as a consequence of being silenced during their time in the school: 'the young people were scornful and angry at the way anti-racist programmes were deployed in their schools. They felt this was often delivered in ways that derided them personally and arguably pushed them further from the anti-racist culture of the schools they attended.'

Some White working-class students and their parents have interpreted antiracist initiatives in education as being part of an ongoing discourse of 'unfairness to whites' that leaves them feeling forgotten and betrayed (Hewitt, 2005: 47). The consequence of an antiracist approach which endorses the racialised positionings of Whiteness and Blackness seeks to essentialise students' racial identities into the damaging duality of either victims or perpetrators, minimising the possibility to move beyond a framework of blame and guilt. This process results when antiracist perspectives are interpreted in classroom practices which reproduce the dichotomy of White positions of privilege and Black positions of disadvantage to the negation of other intersections. Such a deterministic understanding of White people's positionings elides the complexity of individual narratives, which may well straddle complex racialised understandings and experiences, as well as other forms of marginalisation (Ringrose, 2007).

Connections need to be made and maintained between injustices experienced by people of colour and other social injustices experienced, for example, on the basis of class (Gilroy, 1992; Hewitt, 2005). Experiences and perspectives need to be uncovered, accepting that these may operate beyond 'race' into other areas of intersections. Students can be encouraged to value and chronicle their own experiences and backgrounds in relation to wider social realities with which they are engaging the classroom, as, for example, expressed in the lyrics of hip hop (Netcoh, 2013). Another example of this more inclusive perspective that tackles social injustice, including racism, are the *Unfolding Identities* films, in which students are encouraged to respond to the narratives of young people who experience difference, including racial marginalisation, using the framework of themed topics, such as 'experiences of prejudice', 'Britishness' and 'belonging' (University of Brighton, 2016).

Conclusions

Antiracist education as it is again being conceived and advocated needs to avoid the pitfalls of its former iterations. These renewed calls for antiracism and decolonising the curriculum in schools are taking place in a wider context of a determination by state-governed initiatives to uphold the hegemony of Britishness regarding what is taught in schools. This time around, as calls for an antiracist and decolonised curriculum become increasingly urgent, we need to be alert to the myths of racial and cultural essentialism. We need also to ensure that antiracist approaches do not present themselves as a bourgeoisie anti-White practice (Nayak, 1999), and so weaken their effectiveness and relevance. The task that antiracist educators face is to transform negative past perceptions of antiracist education into a pedagogic movement that offers critique of inherent systemic injustice wider than racial injustice alone. Antiracist approaches must make links with other forms of oppression by intentionally engaging with the experiences and narratives of all students. Antiracist education needs to eschew doctrinaire principles that negate nuances and contradictions in our diverse experiences of racialisation. If the lessons of the past legacy of antiracism are to be learnt, the possibility to facilitate and bring to life an intersectional social awareness of ongoing social injustice is open to us all.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

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The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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