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Enough is Enough: De-colonise, Diversify and De-construct the Curriculum

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This article explores the importance of anti-racism in a higher Education context. With reference to the recent discussions on de-colonising the curriculum, I reflect on the importance of the Black Lives Matter movement. I argue more vehemently than ever before – enough is enough – we have no choice but to teach against racism. This article discusses the importance of de-colonising the curriculum and Higher Education and creating learning environments that open out discussions about everyday racism. This, I argue, is core to our anti-racist practise if we intend to build a fairer and a more anti-racist world.

Keywords: De-colonising the curriculum, white priviledge, Eurocentricity, anti-racist education and practise.

Introduction

Watching white supremacists storm US government buildings for a supposed 'stolen election' is almost unbelievable. If one had any illusions as to what white privilege means, look at these scenes at Capitol Hill. The confidence with which these mobs abused the police/security guards, and broke into the building can only be described as white privilege. Had this been a Black Lives Matter (BLM) demonstration, the streets would have been littered with dead bodies. As The Guardian (07 January 2021) noted:

> The contrast between the law enforcement reaction to the storming of the Capitol on Wednesday and the suppression of peaceful protests by the BLM in the summer is not just stark – it is black and white.[1]

Police officers posing for selfies, with 'give me five' handshakes, revealed whose America this is. The white, mainly men, felt at home at Capitol Hill, demonstrating to keep Trump in power, and 'put America first'. As I digested these vile racist scenes, my niece sent me this image (see Figure 1) from a WhatsApp chat group. In just one image, it speaks volumes to the stark, and unashamed racism of Trumpism.

Reflecting on this racism gives added currency to my writing on de-colonising the curriculum and the importance of the BLM movement. We all have to say 'Enough is Enough', we have no choice but to teach against racism.

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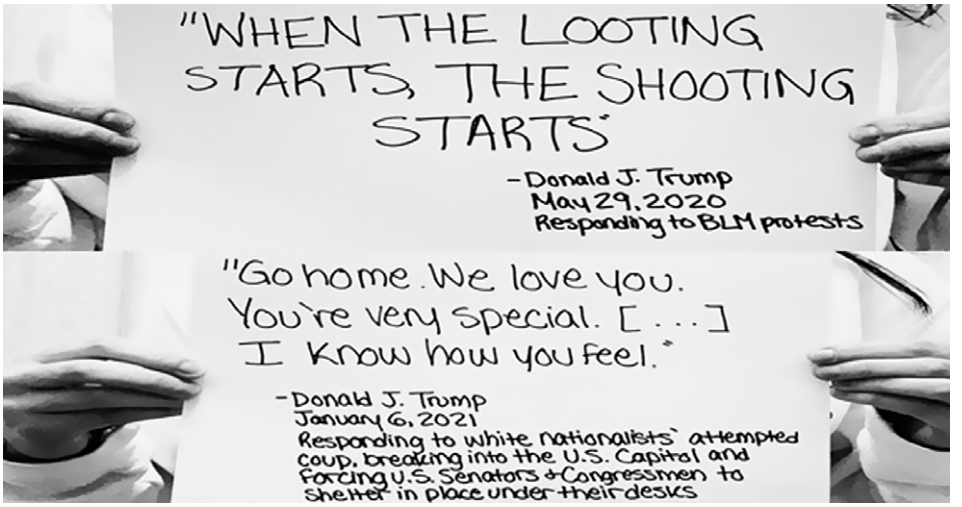


Figure 1. White supremacy-protection for one – outright murderous racism for the black other.

This case study explores the importance of anti-racism in the classroom. As teachers/lecturers, we must open the classroom to a discussion of the everyday racisms and contradictions that exist outside. We must take responsibility to create a learning environment that promotes discussions about racism to help build a fairer and a more anti-racist world.

The sickening suffocation of George Floyd at the hands of a White Minneapolis policeman has justifiably fuelled the force of the global BLM movement across the world and impacted all our lives. These global protests have refocused attention on racism. In the UK, this movement has awoken a plethora of unresolved grievances about institutional racism from the past and the present experienced by Black-British people. The recent Windrush Scandal is but one example of this institutional racism. Indeed, the UK BLM protests have shone a light on history, from the tearing down of slaver Colston's statue in Bristol to the calling for the decolonisation of the Eurocentric curriculum (Peters, 2015; Moncrieffe, 2020).

Amidst this tragic incident of police brutality, we are reminded of the connectivity of colonial racist history with contemporary racism. Like most of the world, our universities were closed to our students: remote teaching has become the new norm, emails more frequent and video calls more common. When George Floyd's murder occurred, we were no longer in our classrooms or friendship spaces to vent our anger and hurt. Unable to share this incident, as I would have done with students, colleagues and friends, we found ourselves glued to the world media. I was fortunate that one of my final year students shared her views and pain:

> Today I wrote a poem to talk about how I felt, about the injustice in the world and the reason Kaepernick knelt. Our melanin to you, is nothing but a sin. Our badge of pride and honour which hides so much within.

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> Tears, heartbreak and pain is what we feel inside, our anger and our misery, no longer can we hide. We paint smiles on our faces and pretend that all is ok, but deep inside we are screaming, when will this go away?
>
> The murder, the rape, the oppression, this all becoming nothing but a nightmarish obsession. From slavery to lynching and dying in the streets, what is the alternative? We come at you with heat?
>
> What will end the violence and continuous contempt, from police brutality and murder, will we ever be exempt? You say we are inferior, violent and callous beings, it's a regular occurrence we are called n****s in your memes. This s**** goes deep and way way back, the struggle in life for people who are black.
>
> Black skin, black hair, black eyes. My love for my people is continuous and it never dies. Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice and George Floyd, a massacre of people, we all should feel the void. Outrage and compassion for people with black skin, my brother, my sister, all who are my kin. My ancestors, my family, a love that is so strong, how can just being black be considered so terribly wrong? Stop with the hate and continuous assault, on our poor black bodies. We need us a revolt. Brother Malcolm and Huey had it bang to rights, they said that this system is purely here for whites.
>
> I CANNOT BREATH, I CANNOT BREATH., he said with his last breath. Another brother we have to lay to rest. Words cannot express the rage deep within but yet society is saying just take it on the chin. NO, I will not sit in silence and say nothing, I will continue to petition, that's one thing for sure. Till a peaceful existence is what we can receive and an end to tyranny and racism is what we must achieve.
> (Laura Campbell, level 6 Sociology, 2020)

Decolonise the curriculum: doing nothing is not an option

As an academic activist, political activism and academic endeavours have always been one. Aged eighteen, an A-level student studying Sociology, Politics and History in 1981, I found myself on a demonstration against the murder by arson of thirteen Black children in New Cross, London. A firebomb allegedly was dropped through a letter box during a sixteenth birthday party. I can still hear the chant on the demonstration: 'thirteen dead and nothing said'. This harrowing experience has marked me for life – not by fear – but to speak out against racism. I carry this torch into my classes (Housee, 2012). This is the background to why I believe we should never give up on anti-racism teaching and curriculum development. I have taught for over thirty years, teaching modules on racism and general sociology. My intent has been to de-colonise our curriculum, teaching through an anti-racist lens. The current changing times have re-energised me, seeing the anti-racist struggles finally aired in academic spaces (Peters, 2015)

The recent UK student-led campaigns – 'Why isn't my Professor Black?' (Arday *et al*., 2020) and 'Why is my Curriculum White?' (Peters, 2015) began their life at University College London. These sparked national debates about the need to de-colonise the university, drawing attention to the Eurocentrism that underpins the curriculum. This student movement made me remember as a student at Essex University in 1982 leading a student campaign against my department asking why our curriculum was white and Eurocentric. The dismissive reply was: the staff body did not have the expertise to teach more diverse modules. I took it upon myself to do my own research and wrote my final

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year dissertation entitled 'A Critique of Race relations in Sociology'. Exemplary work I was told, for which I received a first class degree. This dissertation was consequently used to develop a sociology module on race relations.

Forty years later I find myself here again. But this time, I am the teacher and I feel both disheartened that so little has been done over these years but excited by current student protests and demands starting with the 137-day occupation of Deptford Town Hall. The student campaigners compiled a list of anti-racist demands, calling on Goldsmiths College to implement change. The occupation ended when the university committed to implementing changes without initiating legal action against the protesters. Unlike my student protest, this was a real achievement. The students' questions of 'Why isn't my Professor Black?' and 'Why is my curriculum White?' have since become national campaigns, drawing attention to the racial divide, the under-representation of BME staff, and the Eurocentricity of the curriculum. In each campaign, students have been clear to point to the institutional and structural racism facing UK Higher Education. Much of this protest has coalesced in a movement to 'decolonize' Higher Education (Bhambra *et al*., 2018; Doharty *et al*., 2020; Moncrieffe *et al*., 2020).

Although it is a 'better late than never' scenario, I welcome the current talk about changes in higher education. We are teaching a twenty-first century student body, which will not simply accept the status quo: as we see from these campaigns, they are insisting that change in the academy must come before long.

When our BME students articulate their experiences and demand that universities address systemic racism and decolonise education, we must listen. When students ask why there are so few BME professors, teachers and university leaders, and yet so many students from BME backgrounds, we should explain. And when they see that our BME students do not attain the best graduate outcomes, or achieve the higher degree classifications, we should address this. Universities can no longer hide behind the façade of being 'liberal' and pioneers of equal opportunities; our performance shows we too are institutionally racist. In this case study, I am focussing on work at Wolverhampton and just one grievance – De-colonising the Curriculum.

To de-colonise means to diversify and de-construct the curriculum

Decolonising the curriculum is now a critical topic in education, fostering action for change in schools, colleges and universities. Decolonisation of the curriculum is not new, but today it has renewed momentum because of socio-political awareness of racism within and beyond the university. Many post-1992 universities have become more diverse – I began my career at Wolverhampton University in 1990: BME student numbers were around 20 per cent, today we are nearing 60 per cent. BME students in some of these universities are the majority! We have a duty to offer curricula speaking to their experiences and interests, with BME students seeing themselves reflected in it, beyond Black History Month.

Challenging Eurocentricity is about providing an anti-racist curriculum that critiques the colonial past, presenting a narrative that can imagine a future that is **not** hierarchically racialised having European whiteness and white supremacy at its centre. This requires an awareness of the British Empire and its global economic and political dominance (Bhambra *et al*., 2018) and how this past laid the foundations for continuing racism and

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inequality. As Hall (1978: 26) reminds us, links between Britain as Empire and Britain as Nation are clearly evident:

> The erasure of these links feeds a hegemonic belief that race is 'nothing intrinsically to do with the condition of Britain' [today] and obscures Britain's central role in the construction and maintenance of race.

This understanding of our racialised colonial past, as Joseph-Salisbury (2019: 65) asserts, is central to our understanding of current post-colonial British race relations; if we do not make this connection we are in the danger of facilitating white amnesia, by which he means:

> ... the denial of the histories of racism and white supremacy. It is, in part, the erasure of the historical context that allows white supremacy to endure, as strongly as ever.

If the first step is to acknowledge colonial history and the making of racism, the second step must be to de-construct the current Eurocentric curriculum as legitimate knowledge based on the values and knowledge of the dominant western societies (Bhambra *et al*., 2018; Warmington, 2019). This dismantling of Eurocentric curriculum is an essential part of the social justice work of challenging white supremacy. First, it questions what is in the curriculum, and secondly, replaces it with what is missing in the curriculum – with an offering of BME academic contributions, through an anti-racist approach to the teaching of these modules (Arday and Mirza, 2018; Arday *et al*., 2020).

The UK education system from primary to university has been accused of lacking a coherent syllabus which offers depth and understanding of the dynamics of race and racism within its curricula. This imbalance is highly problematic as it fails to reflect an ever-increasingly multi-ethnic British population (Shilliam, 2014). This has led to a grave injustice as the education of minoritised students and pupils remains an alienating and negative experience, hence requiring serious re-construction so it does speak to these students' experiences and interests. As Arday *et al*. (2020: 03) note:

> Despite notable shifts in decolonising our curricula, there remains the need for a collated and targeted focus to address the paucity of cultural diversity within our canons of knowledge, that in many ways sustain exclusion by omitting knowledge or sustaining dominant stereotypes about ethnic minority groups.

What is to be done?

Singh (2011) suggests that minoritised students feel alienated from their studies because of Eurocentricity. He suggests there is a need to de-colonise the curriculum by making it more inclusive, including more diverse/multicultural content, along with a more critical anti-racist pedagogy drawn from students' interests. From our experience here, De-colonising the Curriculum requires a hands-on approach – it is not simply diversifying it with more non-white texts and stories. Although this is a good start, it also requires systematic challenging of the misrepresentation of minorities – such as the racist myths and misinformation of, say, the criminalisation of Muslim youth through paedophile

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stories. To do this, we have to seek out literature and research materials from diverse communities; this includes BME and white anti-racist academic writings. Thus, when teaching about the rise of Islamophobic racism and attacks, I access Tell MAMA, a national project recording and measuring anti-Muslim incidents in the United Kingdom. I access the research and academic papers from the Institute of Race Relations – and their Journal Race and Class, alongside mainstream sociology literature and texts.

As Arday *et al*. (2020: 17) argue, Eurocentrism currently dominates the curriculum throughout the academy. Such exclusionary forms of education, Arday *et al*. (ibid.) argue, 'minimises diverse histories by not critically interrogating the outcomes of a history of patriarchy, slavery, imperialism, colonialism white capitalism and white supremacy'.

In my sociology course I teach on the Module 'Racism in the British Context'; some colleagues have modules, however, that hardly mention non-European writers and references. When challenged, they point to the fact that there is no need, because after all, I do! My response is collegial, suggesting we permeate BME contributions throughout our degree. And just as the 'icons' like Durkheim, Marx, Weber are central to our curriculum, so should Stuart Hall be (Hall, 1993). This blind Eurocentrism or unbiased racism remains an ongoing battle. In my pedagogic practice, I respond by developing our Sociology curriculum, speaking to our students' cultural interests, and to the racism that is part of their everyday lives. I proactively disseminate such practice and support colleagues as they adopt it. I have led initiatives to ensure that diversity and BME experience permeates the Sociology curriculum and help colleagues develop their modules accordingly, directing staff to educational materials that help diversify their material and white colleagues are currently working on projects to de-colonise the curriculum, positively welcoming this support, one observing:

> 'Conversations with Shirin convinced me that it was a good idea to have a session and assignment on Du Bois. The session was well-received by the students … her encouragement and practical support were integral to attempts to diversify and broaden the Wolverhampton Sociology curriculum.'

One key task was to re-construct reading lists, going beyond the Eurocentric 'expert' canon and bringing in writing from BME and indigenous writers from the Global South (Arday *et al*., 2020). This instils confidence in BME students who come to realise that BME and indigenous academics from outside Europe are well-placed to challenge dominant discourses. Through these readings, students – BME and White – gain perspectives from outside the dominant frameworks of learning, linking, for example, European colonialism to modern-day migration, thereby connecting their parents' and their own experiences to the contemporary context of power in the motherland. The decolonising project goes beyond reading lists and is about how knowledge is imparted, delivered and assessed, asking critical anti-racist questions, equipping students to critique dominant discourses. This helps diverse students to develop their critical thinking, maximising their engagement and participation (Chetty, 2020: 11):

> … …. the traditional top-down method of teaching, with its dichotomy of experts/learners is replaced by a collaborative environment in which students work collectively and apply examples from their everyday lives and histories.

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As I have argued elsewhere (Housee, 2012, 2018), our students provide our best teaching material and template. Our teaching should value our BME students' experience and view it as cultural capital, and privileging Blackness. We must involve our students with curriculum developments; we must talk to their interests and ask what is going well with our curriculum development and what it is we can improve on. We aim to encourage a teaching/learning style that is empowering, that enables student voice, so their experience is shared and validated. This enhances their sense of belonging, promotes self-esteem and indeed builds their confidence. The aim is also to help with retention and progress.

Here I share a comment from a module evaluation from one of my students:

> I have liked the content of the topic and I have found it thought-provoking, I particularly liked the lecture on Islamophobia and Black Lives Matter as they are both topics relevant to today's society.

The comment above is testimony of what students want from their education. Responding to current political racialised reality is not only central to our anti-racist project, it is also about reaching out to what interests our students and what is true to their reality. Minority experience is rarely included in a critical and anti-racist way. Ignoring racism in the curriculum legitimises whiteness as normal, and minority experience as exotic and 'othered'. This in turn racialises our minority students. If racism against Muslims, for example, is not challenged through our curriculum, we produce racial knowledge and racialised subjects, preparing students to expect racism in their world, thereby perpetuating Islamophobia. The failure then to address Islamophobia leaves dominant frameworks and discourses intact as legitimate knowledge (Housee, 2012).

Invisible, or just simply bias?: the role of White privilege in university spaces

Challenging Eurocentricity, then, is the first step to dismantling supremacy. One of the most challenging aspects of the de-colonisation project is exposing the invisibility of white privilege. However, continuing to educate students through an Eurocentric lens prepares white students to accept British National identity and white privilege, marginalising our BME students' experiences and making them invisible. Historically-made whiteness is central for citizenship, as recently seen throughout the Brexit debate: if such nationalism is not challenged, we will move into dangerous territory that could usurp any collective identities such as class (Bhambra *et al*., 2018). For this reason, white supremacy must be challenged. One key problem in higher education is that white privilege is often blindly seen as the norm: there is a lack of critical understanding and knowledge about whiteness and how it works to maintain and reproduce the status quo. Applying a critical race lens to an understanding of educational racialised inequalities means making sense of social identities. The dominance of Whiteness/Englishness in contrast with other identities, such as blackness and 'Muslimness', has to be challenged.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a framework is useful here (see for example Williams, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Delgado and Stefancic, 2001; Gillborn, 2008; Bell, 2009; Dixson *et al*., 2018). CRT explains that white domination is normalised and is

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seen (and unseen) as perfectly natural and legitimate. CRT has been employed in the area of education to provide an appropriate context and framework for research. Gillborn (2005), a leading UK CRT proponent, shows how white supremacy describes a system of structural white domination that is built upon racism. White supremacy from a CRT perspective is not by any means a reference only to white-skinned people as, clearly, not all white people from different class backgrounds will hold the same economic power or cultural/capital or privilege, as Warmington (2019: 6) also argues,

> White Supremacy is systematic and global; a system of power wherein structural racism, white privilege and overt race hate are mutually reinforcing.

White supremacy is understood to encapsulate racism that exists in Western societies; it is seen as normal and persistent, benefiting whites to the detriment of non-whites. White supremacy/privileges should be seen in the same way as patriarchy; when one critiques patriarchy, one is not necessarily saying that male dominance and privilege resides with all men, but that in a social system that privileges male gender as superior, men will benefit.

Critiquing racism is never an easy ride, because de-colonising the curriculum is not simply about highlighting the historical and inherent racisms imbedded in the readings but also about offering alternative non-white world views and critical ways of reading it that centres racism in its argument. If this de-construction does not take place, students will not understand how we are all implicated in maintaining the status quo in power relations. In my own classes I come across situations of discomfort where white students feel awkward, guilt-ridden and embarrassed by the racism they come to learn about. We have to interrogate how whiteness and white structures are not only about how this superiority is personified but how whiteness is a shifting signifier, that resides not only in skin colour, but is an ideological representation of privilege and power (Hall and Jhally, 1996).

I distinguish between whiteness expressed as individual prejudice and whiteness expressed as institutionalised racism. In both cases, though, whiteness is a marker of power in relationship to blackness. Levine-Rasky (2000) offers an analysis of whiteness or white dominance that goes beyond the person, to an understanding of structures and processes. Marking whitearchy (whiteness with hierarchy) (Housee, 2008) is about recognising its ideological, socio-economic and political dominance and about acknowledging Eurocentric racisms. The key point is to acknowledge this and reflect critically. The use of critical pedagogical teaching strategies that question patriarchy and whitearchy is what should be interrogated.

I conclude with two suggestions in the project of de-colonisation and anti-racism in higher education, responding to the two student campaign demands ''Why isn't my Professor Black?' and 'Why is my Curriculum White?'

Diversify our curriculum and employ anti-racist pedagogical practices

Decolonising the curriculum (Moncrieffe *et al.*, 2020) and offering a more diverse curriculum means 'educating' and re-training staff. If our education has been Eurocentric and limiting, we have to take responsibility and say enough is enough, we will re-train our

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staff and find the resources to do it. Higher education communities must unlearn racism in all its manifestations and embrace diversity in all its forms. Eurocentric education should not be the norm in the twenty-first-century classroom: if we do not make these changes, we remain complicit with racism. Our students should be exposed to a pluralism of ideas so they feel a sense of belonging, able to expand their worldview. This is good for our BME student experience, they will feel more engaged with their learning, they will feel valued and this will lead to greater progress and retention. It is also significant for our white students as they begin to take responsibility for the unequal racialised world that we live in.

Increasing the representation of BAME academic staff

Secondly, it is clear that the fastest-growing ethnic groups at universities are BME students. With this pool of graduates, we should be able to find graduates to fill university lecturing posts: this requires making equal opportunities a reality, offering training and resources that open doors to BME graduates looking for academic and teaching careers. We have much untapped talent: I often see young BME PhD researchers and academics at conferences. Our growing BME student body deserves to see more lecturers and teachers like them, where their experiences, and their sense of being, may be reflected more greatly by BME staff interests and positionality. I constantly experience this in the academy with BME students telling me how grateful they are that I, as a minoritised member of staff, teach them as they are able to relate and have greater affinity with me (Housee, 2008).

Yes, we need more BME professors, but achieving this means breaking down a number of institutionally racist barriers. I have first-hand experience of being rejected when applying for associate professor posts. At my university, I am seen as an expert on diversity and anti-racist curriculum. I have given talks to the Governors, to staff conferences, head of department meetings and Student Union conferences on curriculum development and student experience. My publications speak for themselves but this was never acknowledged in the application process. Although I have been encouraged and greatly supported by individual academics and colleagues, and built lasting friendships, my career advancement is stifled. I did not achieve the associate professor post third time round, despite being encouraged to apply. I am the only full-time permanent BME academic staff member in the sociology department after almost thirty years. And whilst our BME student body has increased three-fold in thirty years, this is still not reflected in BME staff and senior staff numbers overall.

I remain in my job because I believe in the good anti-racist work in the academy not only for our students, but also for the institution itself. I believe that education remains the bastion for equality. What inspires me as an academic activist in my teaching and research is the desire to transform students/individuals and society. I seek to deploy a critical sociological imagination in my work. I believe that our scholarship has the potential to enable human societies to respond to the challenge of all kinds of inequalities, at local, national and global levels. George Floyd's murder has given impetus to the BLM movement, presenting us with the opportunity to take stock and to make bigger changes for a better future. We should use this moment to continue the campaign that the

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Goldsmiths students initiated and make our curriculum more anti-racist, less white and less Eurocentric. As Olanisakin (2020) warns:

> Failure to [change] – will not only diminish us in the eyes of the increasingly diverse communities of students on our campuses. It will also diminish humanity as a whole. Universities in the UK and elsewhere can do much better, proactively and collectively tackling racism and all injustices in society. For me, . . . [it is a] determination to make the world a better place, ...

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