

2. Decolonisation of the curriculum

“Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.” – Chinua Achebe

Over the years as an educator, I have experienced moments that triggered in me a sense of shame and humiliation, along with a growing realisation of the ironic miseducation of students by the education system. One moment that stands out in memory is during a lesson where I was teaching Beverley Naidoo’s *The Other Side of Truth* and an eager student raised their hand to exclaim “Did you know that England is the most civilised country in the world?” I was caught off guard. After registering the comment and rapidly considering all my potential responses, I decided to pause the lesson and generate a discussion about the word ‘civilised’. Another moment was looking at an extract from Benjamin Zephaniah’s *Refugee Boy* and realising that my students thought people in Africa didn’t have televisions. When I projected images of vibrant African cities onto the whiteboard, they were stunned. However, impromptu educational moments like these are as useful as throwing tiny orbs of light into a gaping, shadowy chasm. It will take the concerted effort of all educators at all phases to confront rather than preserve harmful narratives about minoritised groups. We all need to respond to the calls to decolonise the curriculum.

So, what does this actually mean?

Essentially, it is a process that begins with an understanding of how Western concepts and ideas have shaped various observations and illustrations of the world. Removing this colonial lens requires intentional effort which includes:

- being critical of information presented as factual
- being critical of prevailing, mainstreamed narratives
- ensuring history is told as accurately as possible, without omissions
- learning and self-reflection.

These suggestions are far from exhaustive but important elements of the process. I call it a process because just as it takes time to build knowledge and construct mind-sets, it will take continued unlearning and deconstructing, in particular our own biases, to effectively engage in decolonising work.

Black History Month

Over time, the gradual inclusion of Black histories, narratives and contributions across the curriculum should mean there is no need for it to be pigeon-holed into one month, but, for now, it's worth thinking about how it might be approached. In 2014, an organisation called Word on the Curb released a short film called 'What I Wasn't Taught in School', featuring spoken-word poet, Samuel King. It addressed the narrow approach to Black History Month, where the focus was typically slavery and the US Civil Rights movement. Though these are significant time periods, and key figures, such as Dr Martin Luther King Jr., Harriet Tubman, and Rosa Parks played instrumental roles in the fight for freedom, Black history is far more expansive. Now, there are countless resources online, ready and available for use in the classroom, whether it be directly from the Black History Month official websites or from other organisations like The Black Curriculum and Black Learning Achievement and Mental Health (BLAM).

The role of PSHE

It is just as important that students are given a space to explore and discuss issues of race and identity. In PSHE, they are encouraged to talk about relevant issues that affect their lives, so why not talk about race? Being a life-skills-based subject, it allows us as educators to address and bring down any barriers that prevent students from understanding or engaging with one another on the topic of racial identity. The ease with which they converse about race will vary across different contexts, but the important thing is to have and facilitate these conversations.

You may want to design foundational lessons that prompt discussions about these:

- What are race and ethnicity?
- What is racism and where does it come from?
- What is the difference between bias, prejudice and discrimination?
- What is representation and why does it matter?
- What language should we use and avoid when talking about race and why?

As said, key parts of decolonising are being critical of prevailing, mainstreamed narratives and self-reflection. Therefore, using these sorts of questions as a foundation allows preconceived ideas about race and racism to be identified, explored and challenged.

Following the foundational stage, students could be led to consider more deeply the impact of racial and ethnic identity on people's day to day lives by observing their lived experiences.

This would provide an opening for students to learn about Human Rights laws, as well as other laws and policies regarding race that exist. Why not learn about national and global landmark cases that instigated change, like The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, which brought the term 'institutional racism' to attention?

As educators, it is essential that we create a space that is safe for all students so that dialogue can happen. That means we need to be comfortable talking about race and tackling racist attitudes that may manifest.

The role of other curriculum subjects

Beyond PSHE, there are plenty opportunities to get students thinking critically about the world around them. In English, students could be led to consider the existence of the literary canon and whose voices are included and excluded. The English curriculum tends to feature writers that examine countries within the Global South from a Western perspective. Often these perpetuate mainstream narratives of people from the Global South as being uncivilised, unintelligent, and poverty-stricken. Students need to be shown texts about the Global South written from the perspectives of the people who live there. When thinking about language, get students to scrutinise the notion of Standard English: how did it become standardised and by who? What stigmas are attached to non-standard English speakers and why? What is a mother tongue and why were colonial subjects forbidden from speaking theirs? In Media Studies, why not have students study the cultural relevance of the film 'Black Panther' and how it defied mainstream representations of Africa? They could discuss the inclusivity – or exclusivity – of things like the Academy Awards. In Creative Arts, students might learn about the appropriation and repatriation of historical artefacts; or discover the origins of rock and jazz music, and how the economic proceeds of these art forms did not always benefit the communities from which they originated. Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) offers the chance to contest racist ideas about intelligence and the impacts of the eugenics movement, while also looking at the numerous contributions from people of colour which have led to ground-breaking discoveries, past and present. In Humanities, students can

learn about the bountiful natural resources of the Global South and how different people lived before the colonial period. Disparities in wealth between the Global North and Global South can be inspected, to challenge reductive dichotomies of ‘rich’ and ‘poor’, or ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ countries. This could lead into an investigation of the deceitful nature of international aid and the complicity of the Global North in the underdevelopment of the Global South.

There are many ways to decolonise the curriculum, and these are just a few ideas. As educators of future generations, it is our moral and ethical responsibility to investigate the facts. Presently, we have novels and textbooks that have been written based on the biases and prejudices of a society, not mere individuals. We have untruths, misrepresentations and suppressions of facts that have infiltrated a curriculum that has been in place for decades. In light of these ‘revelations’, we have no excuse to claim ignorance. Let’s flip the script!

Questions to consider:

- Does your curriculum content preserve or challenge prevailing narratives about minoritised groups?
- Whose knowledge is centred within your curriculum?
- Whose stories and contributions are featured within your curriculum?
- How do you use language when talking about minoritised groups?
- What learning and training do you need to undertake in order to consolidate your knowledge and understanding as an anti-racist educator?