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Repositioning curriculum teaching and learning through Black-British history



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The recent brutal suffocation and subsequent death of African-American George Floyd, caused by a white American policeman in Minneapolis, Minnesota, shocked and angered people across the world. This incident impelled worldwide protests under the banner of the #BlackLivesMatter movement. In the UK, these protests have also thrown a critical focus on how the narrative of British history is represented publicly. Concerns over a historical narrative that portrays black history largely in terms of slavery and colonisation have seen black and white protesters tearing down statues of those seen to have benefitted from the exploitation and oppression of black people. Such symbols are a visible and painful reminder of past trauma. Statues of Edward Colston and Robert Milligan, both slave traders,

have been removed, while Oriel College in Oxford has agreed to remove the statue of the imperialist Cecil Rhodes. Protesters have also called for a decolonisation of the dominant Eurocentric curriculum in education, to give space for the teaching and learning of black history (Weale, Bakare & Mir, 2020) as part of a fuller, more representative teaching of the past (Moncrieffe, forthcoming; Moncrieffe, 2020).

We need to consider all of these events and concerns about history and education more carefully.

First, statues are not history, they are part of a process of memorialisation – at some point in time, influential people decided that certain people deserved to be remembered in this particular form. That does not mean that those statues have to remain there forever: there are numerous examples around the world of statues being removed, replaced or destroyed as governments change. Such developments are part of the changing fabric of society and, if anything, statues are a reflection of what a society (or a certain section of society – usually influential or majority groups) values at a particular moment in time. The concern about history being rewritten misses the point – the doing of history means that it *has* to be rewritten. History is not a static collection of facts, but a process of discovery, reflection and (re)interpretation by each generation.

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This, then, brings us to the question of history in schools and demands to change the national curriculum. Deciding what goes into a history curriculum is a huge responsibility and at present, in England, there is little mandated content that has to be taught. The 2013 proposals for the history curriculum did provide a very detailed list of people and events to be taught, but this got short shrift from the history education community (Guyver, 2016; Harris & Burn, 2016) and was summarily replaced with a more relaxed approach to naming specific content.

There is, however, a requirement that the curriculum enables young people to ‘gain a coherent knowledge and understanding of Britain’s past and that of the wider world’ (DfE, 2013). The outline of the topics in the national curriculum for history do have a strong Anglocentric focus, but there is no reason why that should not include a more representative teaching of people’s experiences (Harris, 2013; Moncrieffe, forthcoming). Movement of peoples has been a constant feature of the history of the British Isles; the population of these islands has therefore always been diverse. To include black history within the curriculum is not, therefore, to ‘rewrite history’ – rather, it is to recognise that certain forms of historical experience have been conspicuously absent from the curriculum. It is a repositioning of the curriculum; we hesitate to use the term ‘rebalancing’ as the question of what is ‘balanced’ is a political one – one person’s balance is another’s imbalance.

This repositioning of curriculum will pose challenges for a teaching force that is predominantly white. There are challenges around their reflexive ability to dismantle their own constructed selves; understanding the experiences of students who come from different backgrounds; developing subject knowledge of new topics (and not just substantive knowledge, but awareness of the purpose behind teaching topics and the intended outcomes); how to teach topics in a way that allows all students to appreciate and understand the wealth of perspectives that exist, and how past events feed into present day mindsets; and developing teachers’ confidence to address these issues.

To simply diversify the content of curriculum is not the same as decolonising the curriculum. Diversifying is simply adding different content. Decolonising goes deeper than that: it requires an awareness of ‘white privilege’ and an appreciation that mindsets have created institutional structures that favour the white majority. Because this privilege has become internalised it is difficult to recognise, so it needs to be deliberately deconstructed. A decolonised history curriculum would provide an opportunity to encompass the black

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experience, and guide teachers and learners to provide a curriculum that is more representative of the full range of past experiences (see for example Priggs, 2020). A decolonised history curriculum would therefore look at black history not only in terms of topics such as Septimius Severus, Quintus Lollius Urbicus, Mansu Musa and the Windrush generation, but would also consider how mindsets have come to be, and how people from different backgrounds experience events and view them from different perspectives. Such approaches can help to disrupt the dominant privileged white discourse, and provide a fuller, richer historical understanding of the past.

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