

Anti-racism resource series

Representation in the curriculum

Co-authored by
Hon. Stuart Lawrence

"Making race and diversity issues part of the curriculum ... helping to provide safe places where people can talk and get advice ... more books about ethnic minority people and cultures and by ethnically diverse authors should be made available and be promoted."

Student[1]

[1] This quote is from the Anna Freud Centre's survey on racism and mental health. A total of 796 respondents aged 13 to 20 completed the survey between 23rd September and 11th October 2021.



Anna Freud

Introduction

In order for children and young people to fully engage with their learning, they need to see themselves reflected in what they are learning about.

Not feeling represented in the curriculum can be disempowering and discouraging. This can negatively affect young people's wellbeing, stopping them from achieving their full potential at school.

YMCA's Young and Black report found that 43% of young Black people said that a lack of curriculum diversity was one of the biggest barriers to young Black people achieving in schools.[2]

Diversifying the curriculum is something many schools may already be thinking about or undertaking, and is something that can have real benefits to students.

Wonu Adedoyin-Salau is an Assistant Headteacher and Curriculum Leader of English at St Bonaventure's in East London. She and her colleagues have set up a working group looking at diversifying their curriculum and ensuring it is representative of their student population.

In this case study, she explains some of the steps she took, with advice for school staff looking to follow the same path.

Case study

In 2020, after the global protests triggered by the racist murder of George Floyd, the term 'decolonising the curriculum' became central to many discussions about curriculum design and curriculum intent.

Like many schools, we wanted to re-evaluate our curriculum choices in light of this. This conversation had started a long time ago in departments such as English and science, who had already made steps to diversify the examples and practitioners they celebrated within their respective curricula. We wanted to expand this work and ensure it was being replicated across all subjects.

[2] YMCA. Young and Black: The young Black experience of institutional racism in the UK, 2020.

Our student population

Our school was founded with the purpose of providing an education for underprivileged boys in the borough of Newham. We have a long history of ensuring that we are delivering a curriculum that provides our students with the best possible life chances.

As a school that is multicultural and multi-ethnic, we felt that it was important to have a curriculum that not only challenged students but made them feel that they were a part of a wider global narrative. We wanted to ensure that our resources, assessment planning and whole-school policies took this into consideration.

One of our whole-school priorities is to ensure that our curriculum provision meets the current needs of our learners to enable progression. Our focus on diversifying our curriculum falls under this remit and consequently is everyone's responsibility.

How we started this work

To begin with, we ran a whole-school CPD on the topic of 'race and education'.

The aim of this was to:

- remind staff of the ethnic, racial and cultural diversity of the school and celebrate that
- establish a safe environment for investigation and evaluation
- reflect upon how we as a school provide a curriculum that is both challenging and accessible to all.

As part of this training, myself and our deputy headteacher, Aine Burke, led a CPD on unconscious bias. We had just started our CAG/TAG assessment process and believed it was important for staff to ensure that their assessment and marking practices were underpinned by a desire for parity and equity.

After these initial sessions, we set up a working party with representatives from every department to create a framework for evaluating our curriculum.

Establishing a working party

The working party was established with the aim of looking at the history of our curriculum areas and the lens that the content is typically taught through.

We wanted the group to consider what inherent biases exist in the curriculum, to challenge these assumptions and to reflect upon how we can better provide a curriculum that is more inclusive and representative of global history.

We sent out some questions around this to curriculum leaders and asked them to use them as a basis of discussion around the diversity in their respective curricula.

We asked that each department then nominate someone to attend the working party sessions and feed back to the rest of their colleagues. We decided that we would meet on a monthly basis, and through our early meetings we discussed and developed five key aims for the group:

1. Review our current schemes of work and consider how representative they are of global history.
2. Consider the inherent barriers within our subject areas.
3. Embolden staff and students to speak about and tackle racialised discrimination.
4. Overturn forms of racialised disadvantage in our teaching and learning practice - most specifically curriculum design.
5. To interrogate our practices and transform them where necessary.



My colleague and I planned and co-led each session and facilitated discussions, but each session required the participants to bring their own findings.

For example, in the first session we discussed curriculum intent, the historical context of 'inclusive education', the findings of the Swann Report (1985) and whether we could see the practical implications in our current education system.

The second session focused on student experience and how they receive the curriculum we offer. We asked staff to choose a group of students to ask a number of subject-specific questions relating to diversity, and then bring those results to the group for review.

The third session focused on curriculum content and teachers were asked to bring a scheme of work that they wanted to review. Teachers would work in threes to evaluate each other's schemes of work and consider where there were opportunities for better representation on global history.

Our hope is to use these initial reviews to create a mini report for wider staff on how to ensure our curriculum is more diverse and representative of global history, and also to create a framework to use for further review. In our KS3 English curriculum we were very keen to introduce our students to an 18th or 19th century context, but from a writer with a diverse background.

We opted to take out The Outsiders - a text that we had taught for several years - and opt for Jamila Gavin's novel Coram Boy, which is set in 18th century England. Our aim was to introduce them to a historical context they may be less familiar with but also to engage with well written literature and challenging themes.



Setting up your own working party

Here are some recommendations and learnings that I've established through doing this work, that you may want to consider if you're planning on doing something similar in your school.

1. Decide and clearly communicate your overall aims for the working party, as well as why you believe diversifying the curriculum is an important step for your school and how it will benefit your students.

2. Create a short, mid and long term plan. Consider what you would like to see in the short term. For example; it might be that one scheme of work is reviewed and changed per subject by the end of the academic year. Or it may be that each department attends specialised subject-specific CPD in this area.

3. Make sure you ask the students what they would like to see. They should always be central to every change in curriculum and policy. Pupil voice is a great insight into how to make meaningful change.

4. Reach out to other schools in your area who have started diversifying and decolonising their curriculum and try to learn from their work; you could even invite them into your school for further discussion and collaboration.

5. Ensure that you are creating a safe space for discussion and accept that you may not know much. It is always important to remember that this will be a long journey - anticipate this but do not let the potential challenges stop you from taking the first step.

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