Student empowerment in the teaching of race equality in Higher Education

…to inhabit whiteness as a not-white body can mean trying not to appear at all. (Ahmed, 2012: p41)

Student initiatives and campaigns such as 'Why isn't my Professor Black?', 'Why is my Curriculum White?', 'I, too am Oxford' and 'Decolonizing the Curriculum' have highlighted concerns about the experience of black students and how race and racism are dealt with in Higher Education (HE) establishments. The decolonising the curriculum agenda includes diversifying the curriculum and questioning the Western canon and the context in which knowledge is produced. It challenges the power relations, the racial and civilizational hierarchy and historical backdrop, reconsidering shared assumptions on which many theories and approaches are based.

These challenges demand those working in HE to reconsider their teaching, learning and pedagogy of race and racism, whilst also thinking critically about their own position and identities. We conclude from our work that such teaching requires creating a dialogical space for students to experientially explore and reflect on their own lives whilst synthesising ideas, models and theories.

Peer-led qualitative research was undertaken at one university on the students' experience of the teaching and learning environment, the curriculum and pedagogical approaches to race and racism in HE. Sixty black and racial minority (BRM) students were randomly selected at Goldsmiths, University of London, representing 24 different academic programmes, predominantly in the social science and humanities.

This article, firstly, explores some context to BRM students' experiences in HE and proceeds to share some of the findings from our research of student experience. We conclude by outlining an approach we use in our own teaching that is rooted in experiential learning and that we have observed has the potential to empower students.

One of the drivers for this study were anecdotal reflections and feedback, from both students and lecturers alike, that racism is taught only as an abstract construct, with an emphasis on knowledge of the subject, and little focus on dialogue and on how to challenge racism. The research confirmed this reality in the classroom.

The national landscape

The national picture demonstrates the sharp inequality and pervasive nature of racism in the HE sector. Despite increasing numbers of BRM students in HE, with them making up 29% of students on full-time undergraduate degrees in England in 2015/16 (HEFCE, 2017), issues around teaching and learning, assessment, feedback and everyday experiences continue to exist. BRM students were less satisfied with their course and did not achieve as well as their peers, with respondents consistently highlighting problems with the curriculum, academic environment, teaching quality, assessment, and academic support (NUS, 2011). Data on 'drop-out' rates reveal that more than 1 in 10 BRM students drop out of university in England, compared with only 6.9 per cent for the whole student population (HEFCE, 2017).

Racialised attainment gaps continue to exist. Depending on entry qualifications, black students are between 6 and 28 percentage points less likely than white students to get a higher classification degree, while Asian students are between 3 and 17 percentage points less likely (HEFCE, 2017). The attainment gap between white and black students qualifying with a First/2:1 degree was 25.3% (ECU, 2017a).

In terms of staffing, the ECU (2017b) report reveals an overall disparity at all levels; 90.3% of senior managers are white, 9.7% are BME, and only 0.9% are black. 89% of professors are white, 11.2% are BME with 0.65% black, which equates to 105 black professors (ethnicity categories here are based on the 2011 census classification system with black including: black Caribbean; black African; black British; black other).

Research from a London university.

Key findings of the peer-led research we conducted with students found that whilst many BRM students described the teaching and learning environment in positive terms, an equal number identified it as problematic, finding it cliquey, isolating, segregating, racist, and hostile. Explanations for this negative experience included feeling isolated amongst a majority of middle-class white students whose 'sensibilities are all very similar, so it can be very cliquey'.

Some felt they were tolerated as black students, but not necessarily valued. They stated that although many white students are not overtly racist, they can be very ignorant and 'when questioned about their ignorance they get defensive.' This echoes Puwar (2004) who suggests that, when challenged, people are thrown because their whole worldview is jolted. Additionally, as hooks (1992) comments, one of the core features of the power of whiteness is its positional privilege of being racially unmarked and invisible. One student reported:

I find that framing my critical analysis within my own experiences of discrimination means that what I have to say is taken less seriously. My lived experiences are not enough; yet my white classmates will present their personal perspectives as a 'norm' and they are received as such.

For some BRM students, the environment caused them to feel uneasy or even silenced:

Generally my guard is up all the time: I don't know when someone is going to make a racially insensitive remark or who will be supportive of my critical perspective as a black woman. It is a very stressful and tiring way to approach academia.

Simmonds (1997: 227) encapsulated this experience: 'In this white world I am a fresh water fish that swims in sea water. I feel the weight of the water… on my body.'

Students raised concerns about the lack of BRM teaching staff; 18% reported lecturers were all white, 65% reported they were mainly white, and the other 17% stated that their lecturers were from a range of black and racial minority backgrounds. Having BRM lecturers made a difference to the teaching and learning experience of a third of the respondents, who cited benefits including: a wider range of experiences

and perspectives; more likely to challenge inequality and Eurocentric approaches; and acting as a role model and sharing common ground. This confirms Sleeter's (2003) research that concluded 'educators of color' are much more likely to bring life experiences and structural viewpoints that critique white supremacy and privilege than white teachers and to engage in activities that challenge various forms of racism. One student commented:

It makes a difference because seeing her [the BRM lecturer] makes me feel like I too can have a future in a field that is dominated by white people. It also makes a difference because she tries to incorporate discussions regarding race, gender and ethnicity whenever she can, more so than white staff.

BRM students highlighted that some white tutors shy away and are not able to handle discussions around race and racism, and that when such topics are raised, eyes often turn to the BRM students who are expected to lead these discussions. One student stated:

He [the white lecturer] seemed to ignore some of the contentious discussion and said we would come back to it and we never did, he was not confident with the subject and we as a class could tell.

Feedback from staff at the university has also emphasised that they sometimes find it difficult to engage with BRM students. Ahmed (2012: 179-80) highlights this discomfort with dealing with racism in HE institutions which results in racism being 'looked over' and terms it as 'overing'.

The curriculum and content of programmes raised concerns with 67% of students reporting their programme was 'very Eurocentric,' stating that 'white male authors dominate the reading lists', that Asian thinkers are referred to as the 'other' perspective, and that 'the works of the great thinkers of Africa and Asia are swept under the rug whilst European thinkers are celebrated'. This caused many to feel disengaged, annoyed and frustrated. As one student stated: 'My cultural and racial differences are merely tolerated and I'm blended into a rigid system dominated by Western thought and structure'.

58% of the students felt that the teaching around race, equality and diversity was limited and abstract, for example: 'confined to one module rather than incorporated into all teaching'. It was described as 'superficial, with people being careful to be politically correct'. Having difficult conversations about racism was avoided with a didactic focus on ideas, theories, data and research being more dominant. One respondent described her teaching on race and racism as 'these issues are very abstract in the teaching especially when they just talk at us, and lecturers tip toe around the subject'.

There were few reports of much engagement and dialogue in the classroom. Even in small seminar groups, several students described situations where one student and the lecturer were talking for most of the time. Where some discussion took place students often described it as being superficial: 'we never really are enabled to express ourselves, the discussion is all couched in theoretical concepts'.

Where teaching did occur around race and racism, examination of the causes was reported to receive little attention. That racism is a significant factor in the fabric of social structures and that it delivers different and more favorable outcomes to white people, was not always explicit or even implicit in the teaching. As one black student shared: 'everything we did reinforced us [black people] as the disadvantaged ones but never addressed the issue of the advantaged ones'.

Black students reported that their teaching of racism in the classroom served only to create greater divisions and silence between themselves and the white students. One stated: 'I recall leaving the first class on racism and the white students, some who I would chat with, not being able to look me in the eye'. Another black student commented how 'the whole lesson was all about 'our' poor situation nothing else'.

A way forward?

The research identifies issues in the teaching and learning environment faced by black and racial minority students. These issues are likely to impact on their engagement, retention and attainment. The research provides insight into BRM students' experiences of teaching and learning around race and racism.

The findings emphasise the importance of including students' reflection, experiences and contribution in the process of designing and structuring teaching and learning. There is a need for creating authentic dialogical spaces to explore race and racism that are not inhibited by dominating white norms of denial, caution, correctness, sensitivity and silence.

The BA Applied Social Science, Community Development and Youth Work programme, an undergraduate course at Goldsmiths, University of London, has a tradition of using experiential group work for the exploration of social justice and equalities grounded in the lived experiences of students (Turkie, 1995; Woodger, 2015). We are using this research to further develop the quality of our teaching in this area.

Experiential group work is central to the three-year programme, with students meeting in groups of around 30 each week throughout their studies. These groups are facilitated by two staff, usually one BRM and one white (and ideally one female and one male). These sessions focus on social justice and race, identity and power and these issues are tackled in-depth through engaging in self-reflection and dialogue. Staff pose critical questions and challenges and do not let issues be avoided or for 'overing' to take place.

The model is underpinned by Freire's (1972) emphasis on emancipatory education as the forging of a critical consciousness, so that the oppressive or inhibiting social realities confronting people can be effectively challenged and transformed. Experiential large group work offers a model of good practice, which equips students with both an experiential and theoretical understanding, which they can put into practice and effectively engage in a range of settings to critically address racism and wider social justice issues in society.

An alumnus of the programme working for a social enterprise organisation recently reflected:

the group work sessions were very powerful and you don't realise at the time, the learning goes deeper so my confidence and analysis of responding and engaging with racism in my workplace has been particularly effective.

Through the group work process, students learn to challenge themselves, to engage in deeper critical reflection of themselves, and to develop an institutional analysis of racism and other issues. Through this, they develop a meaningful understanding of race and inequality that enables them to participate effectively in challenging racism and other inequalities in their spheres of work. Ongoing student self-evaluations, as well as our academic research (Woodger and Anastasio, 2013; Woodger, 2015) find positive student feedback about how these issues are tackled.

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