

## **Shared Discursive History: Rethinking Teachers as Role Models**

### **Abstract**

In the UK, government and educational stakeholders perceive the problem with boys' disaffection and underachievement in school as due to a lack of role models. In political role model discourses Black or Ethnic Minority (B.E.M.) teachers are recruited to modify the behaviour of B.E.M. boys, without attaching any blame to the systemic racism they experience in schooling and wider society. The empirical data for this article is drawn from a research project examining the lives of B.E.M. teachers. Semi-structured interviews with three male B.E.M. teachers are scrutinised for insights to how they perceive and self-define their discursive work. The author proposes a conceptual frame referred to as 'shared discursive history' to contextualise the way B.E.M. teachers live their role model identity. The findings suggest disrupting links made with B.E. M. boys, behaviour and potential trajectory necessitate B.E. M. teachers modelling a critical stance to, and assumptions about, representations of 'other'.

## Shared Discursive History: Rethinking Teachers as Role Models

### Introduction

This article discusses an empirical study undertaken in inner London (UK) into how Black or Ethnic Minority (B.E.M.) teachers position themselves as role models for B.E.M. boys. It applies ideas about identity drawn from cultural studies and feminist post-structural theories about discourse to problematise the ‘teacher role model’ concept.

A commonly held view is that role models are individuals whom others aspire to copy, mimic, emulate or identify with (Gauntlett 2002). Role model relations are usually associated with mimicry because role models are characterised as leaders who inspire others (or followers) to imitate them. Mimicry becomes relevant in role model discourses because, as Carrington and Skelton explain (2003: 254), role models have come to ‘signify an ethical template for the exercise of adult responsibility’, which implies that pupils will be expected to imitate their teachers’ behaviour. This article aims to contribute to understandings about what this ethical norm may signify or how it is enacted by B.E.M. teachers. I shall first rehearse the arguments about the nature of the problem to which the employment of role model teachers is perceived as the solution.

In the UK (as in many Western countries), discussion of teachers as role models centres on the impact of the teachers’ gender identity on boy’s underachievement in school (Francis 2000). One issue that has had a long history in the media is boy’s attainment compared to girls. As Mahony (1998, 46) notes, the 1990s were preoccupied with ‘ . . . a “sex war” mentality in which our ever-increasing preoccupation with who is doing better than whom leads, each year to a media panic.’

In addition, educational researchers have long argued that schools reinforce normative conceptions of masculinity through their structure, pedagogy and curriculum (Connell 1995; Mac an Ghail 1994). The recruitment drives undertaken in media campaigns (DfEE 2000; BBC 2010a, 2010b, 2009, 2008, 2007) reinforce these dominant societal constructs of masculinity (Carrington and McPhee 2008; Dermott 2011; Francis 2006). A case in point are neo-liberalist proposals in the UK government’s 2010 White Paper on education – *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE 2010) – and the *Troops to Teachers* programme written by the Centre for Policy Studies (CPS). The general purpose for introducing troops into the teaching profession is to ‘provide youths with role models

who understand discipline and self-restraint at a time when they need it most' (Burkard 2008, i). On this specific point, Dermott (2011, 9) points out that whilst maintaining discipline in the classroom 'is a precursor to successful learning it is not in itself teaching'.

Other critics of these policies have argued that they are an ill-conceived response to the problem of boys' disaffection in school (Skelton 2012; Carrington and Skelton 2003; Francis et al. 2008; Marsh, Cheng and Martin 2008; Martino 2008a). First, they take issue with the assumptions that male teachers always affect boys in desirable ways and continually improve their academic achievements (Carrington and McPhee 2008; Francis 2000; Foster and Newman 2005; Martino and Berrill 2003; Mills, Martino, and Lingard 2004). Second, critics argue that the assumption that male role model teachers will alleviate the problem of boys' relationship to education serves to mask a misogynist culture of blame (Mills, Martino, and Lingard 2004), namely that boys' underachievement is due to the 'excessive' influence of female teachers (Driessen 2007; Easton 2007; Carrington and MacPhee 2008; Francis 2008; Sternod 2009). Third, men are not a homogenous group. As Connell (1995) points out, assumptions about role modelling are more likely to contribute to the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity, (described as enacting, endorsing and displaying powerful, aggressive authority) than to improve boys' relationships with schooling.

Thus far the role model debate has led to a 'reified focus on the singularity of gender (Martino and Rezai-Rashti 2012, 38) and the reproduction of masculinities (Carrington et al 2008). With a few exceptions (for example: Sternod 2009; Carrington 2002; Maylor 2009), there is little UK research foregrounding other identity constructions. The emergence of alternate ways of thinking about role models and the teachers' cultural identity is needed. The presupposition that identity construction is neutral or universal ignores that, for B.E. M. people, 'race is always already refracted within and through other subject positions, such as gender, class, sexuality and nation' (Coloma 2008, 19); further scrutiny is necessary.

B.E.M. boys' underachievement is rarely argued within role model discourses as symptomatic of systemic racism operating in the education system. The culture of blame attached to B.E.M. boys' underachievement is noticeably silent with regard to structural failures in UK education systems, its institutions or hegemonic practices (Miller 2020; Phillips 2011; Graham and Robinson 2004). Rather, justification for B.E.M. role model teachers is argued through political rhetoric in terms of the need to avoid B.E.M. boys' potential involvement in crime (Johnson 2009). This pathological construction of B.E.M.

boys as future deviants has created a regime of truth that perpetuates public discourse by media campaigns (BBC 2011; Slovo 2011), from educational stakeholders (REACH 2007; Helderman 2002; Cooper 2005) and is largely uncontested. The point made is the recruitment drives function as technologies of governance (Foucault 1979) and the imperative to control the social behaviour of young Black men (Brown 2012; Sternod 2009, 2011). Given the entrenched bias about B.E.M. boys' trajectories, to what extent are their B.E. M. teachers expected to mimic such a policing role?

There is a wealth of research studies on the prevalence of institutional racism faced by B.E.M. teachers in UK schools (Miller 2020; Phillips 2011). Despite the populist claim that recruiting B.E.M teachers can ameliorate the effects of systemic inequality in education, this assumption is rejected (c.f. Odih 2002; Maylor 2009; Rezai-Rashti and Martino 2012). While accepting there are contested interpretations of institutional racism made by some scholars (although compare Miles 1989), this article argues the effects of institutionalised practices and arrangements constitute a normalised oppressive social condition for a significant proportion of B.E.M. teachers in UK schools (Cole 2004; Page 2020). Their everyday relations of power in institutions, schools or classrooms function to position them as distributors and recipients of (at times) entrenched biased forms of knowledge, beliefs and values. It is generally agreed that, while individual B.E.M. teachers may at times be influential, many operate within structures that collectively limit their agency. Rethinking the role model arguments requires affirming that B.E.M. teachers have been inured to misrepresentation and differing degrees of symbolic violation. Also knowing or acknowledging that the historical legacy held by B.E.M. people is one of subjectification to derogatory discourses of representation and instances of resistance to dominant paradigms (Brown 2012). A rethink about what it means to be a role model calls for voices from the perspective of a marginalised group, whose narratives and knowledge are counter to (or absent from) dominant representative discourses. This article examines how B.E. M. role model teachers read themselves intellectually and affectively into the subject positions offered by dominant and oppositional representations (Hall 1996) by exploring their pathways and spaces for pedagogical activism. After a brief discussion of methods and methodology I aim to throw light on the predicament of B.E.M. peoples' marginality and inclusivity by presenting the findings of an empirical study of three male B.E.M. role model teachers.

## Methodology and Methods

“Positioning is described as the discursive construction of personal stories that make a person’s actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts” Harré & van Langenhove’s (1991:395)

This scholar’s definition is used to guide the data capture process used to shed light on the B.E.M. teachers’ positioning strategies with B.E.M. pupils. My position as a Black female teacher educator enabled me to identify potential participants through a combination of personal contacts and snowball sampling. The empirical data for the article draws from a research study of seven (male and female) B.E.M. teachers who self-define as role models.

Two semi-formal in-depth individual interviews with each participant lasting from between one and two hours were conducted at a location of their choice. The teachers were asked about memories of their education, career journey, role models, and self-perception as teachers. In the follow-up interviews the questions were around what the role model identity meant for them personally and for their work. The interviews were transcribed, coded and analysed. The findings from the salient inter-related features emerging from the qualitative data reveal the complexity of living on the margins as a B.E.M. teacher and associated exclusive implications attached to liminality.

This article centres on the discussions with three B.E.M. male teachers (Nigel, Ali and Kenneth) to examine, through their narratives, the strategies and actions they embed in their praxis. In addition to schoolwork, Ali and Kenneth do outreach work within their community while Nigel manages a franchise after-school club. The aim is first to highlight the distinctive perspectives they attach to their discursive work, and the dynamics of engaging and relating with B.E.M. boys. Second, to illustrate features of B.E.M. male teachers’ experiential knowledge that they use to signify and perform as role models to B.E.M. pupils. Third, given the construction of B.E.M. boys in representation discourse, to examine the counter-narratives they use with B.E.M. boys to resist ‘assigned masculine’ labels or forms of representation.

## **Shared Discursive History**

Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere ‘recovery’ of the past, ... , identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (Hall, 1989:225)

Cultural identities’ fluidity is understood as resulting from the trauma to B.E.M. peoples’ experiences through the exercise of dominant regimes of representation (Hall 1989; Hall 1992; Hall et al 2000). In order to examine how B.E.M. teachers position themselves as role models we need to consider the politics of their self-representation (Hall 1996; Martino and Rezai-Rashti 2012). In other words, the degree to which pedagogical activism is possible, and the way the teachers make sense of their invisibility/hypervisibility and representation in school, the community and elsewhere. This would allow for nuanced understanding about the meaning they attach to their image and how their interpretations are actualised by their discursive work. By taking a discursive approach to the category ‘self-represent experience’ the analysis treats B.E.M. teachers’ accounts of their everyday interactions as events they perform and that surface in the stories they tell.

Shared discursive histories (Alexander, 2018) conceptualise the way B.E.M. teachers live their role model identities through multiple positioning strategies. Shared discursive history proffers a holistic view of the social dynamics involved, and representations of cultural identities. Shared discursive history is used because marginalisation processes are distinct due to its structurally racialised dimension and its interplay with culture (customs, beliefs). Shared discursive history comprises of three mutually inter-dependent generic organising themes: (i) shared marginality (ii) performance of role model identities (iii) deployment of cultural resource. In the findings and analysis, the personal stories (his stories) overlap intertwine and intersect with overarching teachers’ narratives; they are organised so as to structure the analysis of the findings about ‘becoming’ or ‘being’ a B.E. M. teacher role model.

## ***Shared Marginality***

Shared marginality refers to an empathetic perspective that underpins the way that B.E. M. teachers relate to B.E.M. pupils. A teachers’ empathy with their pupils stems from

experiences within the socio-political context of their work where they too have been recipients of varied forms of micro-aggression. Their empathy is based on understanding the affective dimension of marginalised positioning and its effect on pupils' subjectivities. For example, they all talked about past, current and future events where they were confronted with, or recognised the implication of their 'otherness'. These events are critical because they are stories about the teachers' former (and present) 'identities' when they were (are) subject to certain dominant or cultural conditions. While establishing effective relationships is central to teaching and contained in all the stories, they all emphasised educational experiences with similar preconditions (social constraints) to B.E. M. pupils. The argument made is that shared marginality is an empathetic and justifiable perspective that all three teachers have because it gives them a strong sense of belonging and cultural affinity that forms the basis of their relationships.

Nigel taught in three quite varied schools, the first of which was a supplementary school in South London. Generally, these schools are understood as oppositional to the mainstream schools in terms of, for example, curriculum content, pedagogy or the regulatory ideal of 'compulsive Eurocentrism' (Hall 1996, 16). Despite his lack of teaching experience, as a graduate, he gained recognition and status which enhanced his self-worth. Nigel said: *'I really felt valued there . . . the parents and boys knew I'd get them good results . . . I could offer specialist knowledge that was really needed at the time'*. The cultural hegemony of the school can be reasonably assumed to adhere to dominant traditions that emphasise patriarchal notions of deference. As a staff member he was expected to uphold the school's mission statement based on respect, traditional values, and unquestioned obedience (partly due to parents' expectations). Nigel explained: *'of course you're helping them with their schoolwork, but at [School X] there's the added extra that when you're with them it's about showing them our ways . . . so they feel good about themselves'*. Nigel illustrates empathy with the pupils by saying, *'they relate to me because we come from the same background where education is the key and . . . there's discipline involved'*. Here he positions himself as someone who forges amicable relations with the pupils. He says:

*There's a strong cultural identification because there are children of similar backgrounds. . . . You know the foods we eat are the same, the way we relate to our parents would be the same . . . at home we're the same and that can be an important factor for them getting along . . . we make them proud of being Nigerian.*

Nigel positions himself as someone who, through the promotion of a collective identity, endears himself to pupils. His allegiance with them was also evident throughout his talk

when he frequently switched to the collective 'we' and 'us', giving weight to the argument that the school's inclusive environment provided Nigel with cultural affiliation and a sense of belonging.

He reflected on contrasting critical events when he moved to his second school where the teachers, as in most European schools, were almost exclusively White and middle class (Ross and Hutchings 2003; Escayg 2010). Here Nigel had to navigate and learn how to contest a very different disciplinary regime. He recalled that his attempts at managing his teaching groups were initially confrontational and emotionally frustrating. His difficulties may have been partly due to his inexperience. Nigel says he chose the school because he believes that any school is a potentially transformative site for the '*empowerment of pupils . . . regardless of their cultural heritage or background*'. There were very few African pupils attending the school. Although Nigel occupied a less powerful position within the hierarchy of the school, he was surprised to be estranged from the B.E.M. pupils and disappointed with the attitude and behaviour towards him by many of the Nigerian boys in his teaching groups:

*Once they are in the same environment as the other children they become different. They are not willing to relate to you. . . . They're just totally different . . . despite both of you being of the same cultural background and [they are] totally aware of that . . . [they] don't really want to be identified with you.*

Clearly, Nigel's assumption of 'culture-matching' is deeply context related. His power associated with traditional forms of relating with the Nigerian boys is constrained. Within this classroom Nigel is denied an authoritative position from which he can relate to the boys; their resistance to his expected deference is disempowering. Nor do positioning strategies based on parity provide automatic membership; Nigel is viewed and treated as an 'outsider'. He later rationalised the boys' behaviour in terms of alternative (friendship, ability, locality) allegiances and concluded by saying: '*obviously . . . [it] shows a difference between them and the others [pupils]. . . . They feel . . . that they have to act differently*'. It is possible that the pressure for the Nigerian boys (positioned as 'other') to conform to the dominant mode of relating/behaving may have been compelling, however, Nigel's estrangement forced him to re-appraise the veracity of his earlier beliefs. Despite their apparent cultural affinity, the classroom environment produced exclusive boundaries which Nigel, a marginalised Nigerian man, could not cross. So, although shared marginality describes empathetic perspectives, teacher-pupil relations are also fragile and always contingent on other power



allegiances.

We turn now to Ali who attended primary, secondary school, university and subsequently obtained a teaching post in one of London's most densely populated areas (Keith 1995; Hutchinson and Varlaam 1985) noted for its higher levels of poverty and unemployment when compared nationally (Murshid 1990; Tomlinson 1992). His empathy derived partly from knowing about the social conditions many of his pupils had to operate under:

*.....first of all, I think I have a basic understanding of most of the Asian pupils in the school. I do understand how their life works and where their life has started off from.....I've had the same problems.. what happened for me in school is when I needed that extra help at home it wasn't there...my mum speaks no English she was not able to help me with my education.*

By way of compensating for his earlier disadvantage, Ali began volunteering in after school clubs in the local area, he modestly states: *'I'm just a person who I would say is involved in this community... so in that respect I do have some standing'*. The term 'community' is contestable and ambiguous, with different interpretations within disciplines (Howorth citing Crow and Allan, 2001:1). Here I apply Back's interpretation that 'communities do not exist sui generis, they are instead imagined and created on a, more or less, daily basis' (Back, 1996: 238). Ali says he is renowned because of his participation in various community activities:

*...the younger generation do see me and they know me, who I am and where I'm from..... after school as well ... so they do see my face around, they know how I was before.... I saw someone else a couple of weeks back, he wasn't doing so well in terms of his education. He was involved in gang violence, even he came up to me, you know, said how can I get out of this, you know, what can I do?*

Here Ali alludes to having a reputation although he does not make his 'former' life explicit except to suggest he turned his life around in a significant way thereby changing his life outcomes: 'they know what I do, that I'm a teacher . . . and they realise . . . he's walked the steps ... the path ... we are walking now ... So let me see where he's going'. For Ali, his empathy is a result of comparing his past identity with that of his B.E.M. pupils and having experiential knowledge about the choices available to them.

Ali's belonging is multi-layered, since he 'achieves membership and recognition at both an individual and social group level' (Milling 2013, 1). Ali says he is

frequently approached by parents about their child's progress or demotivation in the school or arbitrating in inter-generational disputes. He says he must conform to cultural protocols since unexpected encounters often occur at social or religious gatherings. For Ali, there was a constant blurring of his private and professional life, '*all the time . . . I'm on show . . . everywhere, I can't really go undercover!*' Ali's interactions within his community are understood as a discursive experience about belonging (Delanty 2006, 188), since he relates to pupils through his interactions with their extended family. The community sees Ali as belonging to them because he inhabits spaces where formal cultural modes of relating cannot be easily resisted.

Ali constructed a life world that he shared with London's Bengali youths where his manoeuvres through their community could be precarious. Gang violence and territorial aggression to and among Muslim men is not uncommon (Keith 1995; Dwyer 2000; Modood 2005). To indicate his insider knowledge of Bengali people's marginalised positioning in society, at the start of our first interview Ali extensively recounted an incident in which he was stabbed and subjected to an unprovoked racist attack. Ali explained he relates to the youths, because the incident he experienced typifies the social reality of street life experienced by some young Bengali youths,

*... you see this area and you think it's all Bengali people so everything's OK, but it's not ... there's a lot you don't realise ... or you're on the outside looking in at us so you don't know what it is really like living here ... it's not that safe for us! It's not just me, random stuff happens to loads of guys I've known.*

Ali has a territorial perspective due to his close affinity to his local area (Pickering, Kintrea, and Bannister 2012) yet is frustrated by the dangerous social conditions he shares with other youths in the community. Shared marginality is interpreted as a perspective derived from Ali's experiential knowledge of 'street culture which is male dominated and highly macho' (Hopkins 2006, 338). His empathy extended to his pupils through his work in his school, the community and relations with their families. These relations promoted a sense of belonging, for example by his adherence to dominant ways of cultural social interacting. As we shall also see for Kenneth, Ali's empathetic perspective derived from knowing what it meant to negotiate complex assaults (internal and external) on one's cultural group.

Kenneth said he strategically chooses to be at times 'a silent witness' to the collective entrenched biases that impact on B.E.M. pupils' experiences in his school.

Following the appointment of key personnel, entry selection procedures to re-configure the schools' pupil demography were introduced. Kenneth claims part of his schools' revised vision was to attract 'alternative' clientele i.e. White middle-class pupils. The school intended to raise its academic profile and enhance its market position by 'cream-skimming' (Apple 2001; Whitty, Power, and Halpin 1998). The schools' initiative typifies perspectives fuelled by a collective memory of Britishness (Hesse 2000), in which there is an imagined future with a particular type of pupil population while at the same time the local reality is one of an increasingly racialised population. The implication is the schools' academic profile is achieved by pre-selection (racial profiling) rather than celebrating diversity or valuing B.E.M. pupils' cultural capital, Kenneth commented on the school's 'regime change' by saying:

*... it is an issue for me, because I would assume that in any school there is always a cultural baseline from which to teach kids, .... and how you interact with children, and if it is not empathetic within the cultural context within which the school is located ... then you are going to have confusion and disparity there.*

Furthermore, according to Kenneth, the creaming initiative creates attitudinal indifference among some colleagues towards certain groups of children. He added:

*... When I look at how my White colleagues interact with the Black kids I see them enforcing a culture upon Black kids without any dialogue with them. Or blatantly saying, in fact rejecting and ridiculing it, "oh that's stupid...I think that way is nonsense ... this is the way". It's as if there is some universal blueprint about how people should behave. That's what I see, big time! ... I think that's the difference between my interaction and theirs.*

Kenneth further referred to his colleagues as 'cultural bullies' thereby positioning them as 'others' who impose hegemonic perspectives or preferred forms of comportment and behaviour (Brooks 2012; Allen 2013). Symbolic violence concerns the ways in which people in positions of power maintain the dominance and subordination of others through various practices (Bourdieu 1986). Although Kenneth does not use the term, I interpret symbolic violence (which is usually linked to class) as forms of racialised insults directed at B.E.M. people. Hall and Jefferson 1989, 394) points out, with regard to Black people in British society, 'race is the modality in which class is lived'. The wounding comments and

ridicule Kenneth observes are read here as forms of symbolic violence perpetrated on B.E.M. pupils.

Kenneth's '*conscious decision*' not to advance to managerial posts means that he is not in a position to significantly alter the attitudes and views of the dominant group. Neither can he choose passivity without distancing himself from the B.E.M. pupils with whom he identifies. Kenneth had a conflicting sense of belonging to some groups of colleagues and with pupils at times. I prompted him to disclose how, or whether he crosses this divide given that his positioning is often at the 'interface'. Kenneth said: '*talking to the pupils, hearing their point of view often gives me the chance to either speak on their behalf or talk to them about what they would do next time ... some get it, but dealing with provocation can only be understood in hindsight*'. He related to the pupils because, like him, they were sometimes subjected to having their 'different' knowledges devalued. Conflict resolution requires both parties to reflect on previous actions and to develop strategies for imagined or future events. However, for Kenneth, an overwhelming barrier for him was his colleagues' ingrained fear. He described the situation with colleagues by saying, '*they are worried about the Black pupils . . . scared mostly of the boys.*' According to Kenneth, how his colleagues related to the boys was disrespectful, because, too often, it led to unwelcomed confrontations: '*the Black boys are more concerned about losing face . . . respect is a two-way street as far as I'm concerned . . . some staff definitely need to be re-educated culturally*'. Kenneth was frustrated with the absence of collective dialogue between White and Black teachers (Delpit 1988, 1995) on how to relate with B.E.M. boys, and the continued use of ineffective (disparaging) social interactions.

Shared marginality was an empathetic perspective shared by all three teachers that gave them a strong sense of belonging (IBerdún and Guibernau 2013) and cultural affinity since it underpinned the relationships they developed with B.E.M. pupils. Their stories later revealed the politics of the teachers' interactions in school and their communities that at times manifested as symbolic violence. The his-stories have discursive authority to describe a unique relational view about sharing pupils' sense of powerlessness, and a perspective about what it means to relate to B.E.M. youths. Having pointed to some of the reasons why they related to B.E.M. pupils, in the next section the teachers describe interventions they think epitomise their identification and enactment of their notion of a role model teacher.

### ***Performance of role model identities***

The teachers' stories were, as expected, saturated with typical everyday teacherly inter-

actions and situational events in their schools. They were asked to rationalise their work and give examples to illustrate what performing as a role model meant to them. An overriding concern was not only the politics of their enactment of a role model teacher but also the image they constructed for themselves. In the following extract Kenneth talks about the way he interacts with B.E.M. parents and pupils:

*Kenneth: Because I think, not within because people don't see who I am within, but what you can see on the outside is still a rare thing. A black guy who is in a profession, who looks like he's doing well, and when he speaks he sounds like he's talking some sort of sense, yet still able to communicate with them, who hasn't ... and I use this phrase carefully ... 'sold out'.*

*Interviewer: ... What do you mean by 'sold out'?*

*Kenneth: There's a general feeling, and I will take this from the communities that I know about in North and South London. When black guys get to a certain level their cultural allegiances change. People believe that they are playing the game so much that they forget the culture that we have as African and Caribbean people and only go for white middle-class culture that we are situated in ... and kids see that ... and are not all that impressed.*

This extract illustrates the complexity of B.E.M. teachers' identification as role models and the importance they attach to social signifiers. Kenneth's account typifies situations where the teachers disrupt the signifying process so as to be read as authentic. Here, Kenneth rejects being positioned as '*sold out*' by others since it is a pejorative term synonymous with someone who internalises and wears as a social mask the White man's disposition. In similar ways, all the teachers refer to construction of themselves in terms of how they may be read inter-textually.

Following Glaude (2007), an important aspect of performance is the manner in which the teachers enact their beliefs within a social space (Glaude, 2007). Here the suggestion made is the teachers' beliefs formed by the empathetic relationships they establish with B.E.M. pupils are entangled with their discursive work. Although their beliefs are influential in defining themselves as, or becoming a role model, the argument made is teachers strategically perform their particular 'role' by offering *preferred* readings of themselves to B.E.M. pupils.

Nigel, Ali and Kenneth talk about hyper-visibility in their schools as productive and view ownership pivotal to their acceptance or rejection by B.E.M. pupils. Kenneth says:

*‘... as a Black man you get singled out. ... They want to know if you are someone they want to relate to.* Throughout many of his stories Kenneth made repeated reference to *‘black guys’* which I read illustrates he engages with B.E.M. pupils in ways he thinks make him appear authentic. Ali recalls an occasion he overhears a group of boys in the school corridor talking about him, when asked to repeat their comments they responded by saying: *‘Sir, the new kid was saying that you’re the safest teacher in the school’*. One of several remarks about his hypervisibility made by Ali:

*You get it [attention] from kids wanting to know [how you’ve walked the steps] and how to do it and they see you as one of their role models or they see you as their peers and they look up to you. ... They come to you to and ask for help.*

A possible explanation could be that pupils seek out B.E.M. teachers merely for curiosity, or that they seek out culturally relevant teachers, or those known for having empowering pedagogical practices (Sefa Dei and James 1998; Simon 1995). Kenneth and Ali’s observations support the findings of other scholars that minority pupils come to the classroom with cultural terms of reference about their B.E.M. teachers that may affect interactions (Brown, 2012; Johnson 1995; Simon 1995). A politics of representation approach to studies on role model ‘teacher identity’ raises questions not only about the silenced voice but also about the invisible image. Simon (1995) uses the term ‘image text’ to describe the discourses that students construct about the competence of minority teachers. Nigel talked about his high profile and popularity at his current (third) school by noting, *‘some of these things are subliminal. . . and in this school I’m talking about reaching children of a different racial background to myself’*. Here Nigel is referring to his body as an image text that he creates to clearly distinguish him from his colleagues. He later added:

*Even in your everyday going from here to there, somebody is watching, seeing your demeanour, seeing your outlook and wanting to relate to you. ... It’s almost a bit scary ... cause you’re not always aware of them but they are aware of you. ... it opens up debates about their needs. ... Are you the right person? there’s a responsibility there about the way you carry yourself.*

Two inter-related points emerged from the teachers’ reflections: their hyper visibility and its influence on how they perceived their role model identities. First, all the teachers in the study believed that the pupils’ gaze is highly significant and influential in what they do.

Second, they were driven by a sense of accountability and therefore mindful of the quality of the interactions they had with B.E.M. pupils. As Nigel subsequently pointed out, *'I think children are very smart, I think it is often underestimated what you give to children, . . . even in your silence'*. The argument I wish to advance is the teachers positioned B.E. M. pupils in their stories as critical evaluative learners with a burgeoning curiosity about forms of B.E.M. male representation. These beliefs underpinned the way they interpreted and performed their roles, and characterised as scaffolding B.E.M. pupils' critical thinking.

By way of illustration, Ali described an intervention where he prompted pupils to re-examine their ideas about representations of cultural groups in discourse and expressions of masculinity. He recalled a situation where his initial aim was to disrupt pupils' pre-conceived ideas about peer group expectations, *'one of the boys told me there was going to be a big fight happening. Cause I've seen it all my life when I was growing up'*. Here Ali positions himself in the story as a chosen arbitrator, yet there is a poignancy to the situation given his 'street' experiences. He continued by saying, *'I kinda like got in the middle of it . . . and spoke about the rights as a human being, "Is this right? Is this wrong? Do you think it's going to be acceptable?"* Ali positioned himself (physically) within the body of the spectators, transforming the pedagogical space to stage/instigate arguments about choices and consequences. One reading would be that all teachers have a duty of care, so Ali's intervention was a justifiable exercise of disciplinary power. Clearly, the situation necessitated the assertion of moral leadership. His actions are undeniably what one would expect of any teacher in such a situation. However, Ali interpreted the situation as a chance to perform his role, namely disrupting the boys' collective understandings around dishonour and masculinity. A dominant cultural reading of such an event, and for the boys concerned, as *'backing down'* interprets as an act as 'unmanly' and shameful (Modood 2005; Ouzgane 2006). Ali explained the challenge of being a role model was not only about getting the boys to question their ideas about their masculinity, or group expectations around honour; he said that you have to model your beliefs,

*... and just speak ... on a level where they understand you and don't see you as a teacher then, but as a friend and they kinda understand. And I'm like saying "look ... is it worth it? Who's going to be on the losing side?" ... I just try to explain to them that ... "yes ... think about your actions."*

Turning to Kenneth, his exemplars were interventions where he promoted counter-narratives to pupils' views about culture. He also recognised the potential

transformative part of his work as a constant challenge because it requires expecting resistance and de-mystifying certain popularly held truisms. He identified two groups of B.E.M. pupils. The first are pupils who he says were, 'quite proud of their cultural heritage and will cling onto it but tend to use it aggressively, against the culture that is in the school'. Rather than exhibiting cultural pride, some B.E.M. pupils perpetuate the stereotyping through which Black boys are frequently labelled (Sewell 1997; Vincent et al. 2012) or the 'loud' or sexual scripting attached to Black girls in dominant discourses (Fordham 1993; French 2013). His view supports common findings from these research studies that pupils' resistant stances are expressions of, and responses to the hidden injuries of racism and sexism or other forms of categorisation. Kenneth argued that the manner in which some B.E.M. pupils attempted to display their assertiveness can be counterproductive. By acting 'against the culture', Kenneth claims B.E.M. pupils' behaviour can be symptomatic of their unarticulated angst. The second group he identified were those embarrassed by how their culture is represented in dominant discourses. Kenneth explained by saying: 'they think it's inferior whether in the intellectual sense . . . or in the cultural sense, in comparison to the main culture that's in the school'. Kenneth said he often opened discussions with B.E.M. pupils because, 'their understandings about culture are misguided'. Kenneth felt that other, more deep-rooted issues relating to the representation of culture need exploration and said that they equally apply to either groups of pupils. I prompted Kenneth to explain how he dealt with the different views pupils hold:

*I ask them why they think this, ... where's it coming from. I discuss and show them sometimes that the choices that cultures have made are historically based or indeed ad hoc and there's nothing underneath it that gives one culture more merit than another, it's just the way ... and for them to become more aware, and when reports on this culture or other cultures are made, they look at the culture from another point of view. The term I use with these kids is Eurocentric, that the views and criticisms of their culture are Eurocentric, because they [the speaker/writer] are not in that culture ... their views of it are biased. That's why they have a problem with it. ... I'm mostly provoking their views on a one-to-one basis, but I do assemblies ... with the tutor group too.*

Confrontations of this kind were on-going strategic challenges for the male B.E.M. teachers since they believed their performance as 'role model' was predicated on developing pupils' criticality. In 'Fearless Speech', Foucault (2001, 15) uses the Greek word



‘parrhesia’ to describe true speech in which the subject is articulating sincere convictions that they authenticate by their public actions in a context where the act itself pre-supposes an asymmetry of power. Kenneth performed his role by promoting counter-narratives both to individual pupils and in the public assembly domain. Here, the audience included colleagues from whom his opinion may have risked reprisal but he was empowered to ‘speak a truth’ (Foucault 2001, 15). In a similar vein Ali, performed in the spaces available in school to engage with pupils in ways which questioned their attachment to dominant discourses around honour and cultural representation or their assumptions about masculinity.

As the teachers’ intervention stories suggest, the power of minority groups to represent themselves within dominant discourses is complex and diverse (Brown 2009, 2012; Van Dijk 2008). For these teachers, being and performing as a role model becomes synonymous with any act where critical engagement with pupils is directed at re- thinking what self-representation as a B.E.M. human being may mean. Although they expected intermittent B.E.M. pupil resistance, the teachers’ actions were informed by a shared marginality and the need to equip pupils to critique dominant narratives about themselves and others.

### ***Deployment of cultural resource***

People know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don’t know is what they do does. (Foucault, personal communication cited in Dreyfus and Rabinow 1984:187).

A significant interconnecting theme to emerge is the divergent ways all the teachers in the study utilised cultural resources. The B.E.M. teachers knew their cultural capital in school was a beneficial commodity, so applied their bilingual skills (translation, advocate work). Also, their familiarity with patois (or other community dialects) was valued (and welcomed) by many B.E.M. pupils and parents. Kenneth’s community connections allowed him to offer alternate experiences (ranging from participation in fringe theatre to access to recording studio) whenever B.E.M. pupils expressed an interest. In addition, Nigel deployed an interesting resource because his actions epitomised the neo-liberal mindset.

Teachers in English schools operate within a performance culture that encourages them to engage in self-forming practices while being conditioned and constrained in contexts characterised by increasing competition. For example, placing

the onus of responsibility for professional development on the individual (rather than the school) whose decision pre-determine their career potential. As Hamann (2009) points out, one effect of neo-liberalism is to make competition among human beings appear ‘natural’ or a matter of ‘common sense’ because of its active interventions in the social realm.

At his third (current) school, Nigel was one of five minority teachers, (but part of the middle management team). In his attempts to stand out among his colleagues he drew on his knowledge of the aesthetic preferences of youth neo-subcultures as an exploitable resource. Nigel actively constructed a personal style that he said productively demonstrated his individuality. He claimed to ‘make more of a concerted effort’ regarding his sartorial choices. Nigel’s commodification of his body can be described as a form of neo-liberal entrepreneurial activity. As a keen sports person who regularly participated in staff sporting events, he said pupils frequently commented on his athletic prowess and physique. The potential for dialogue was powerfully present and exploitable by Nigel who said pupils asked: ‘*Do you do marathon running sir?*’, ‘*Are you in training for body building sir?*’ and, ‘*sir, shouldn’t you be a footballer?*’ Nigel explained that textual readings in the form of questions were not restricted to B.E.M. pupils. Given the stereotypes linking Black men with sport, one effect of his commodification could be to reproduce dominant discourses around Black masculinity. Nigel claimed that it offered a space to discuss an unusual range of diverse topics and thereby extend his pedagogical relations. He reflected on the positivity of these interactions by saying, “*I feel that some of the young boys they kinda looked up to me*” . . . *I’m pleasantly surprised how easy we can then go on to talk about other stuff that’s important to them*’. Nigel’s body as a text also engaged pupils vicariously in discourses about what they could become.

One interpretation is that Nigel’s style preferences convey culturally coded meanings in a subtle manner giving them their own communicative power (Hebdige 1995). For Nigel, ‘becoming’ a role model in school required him to offer forms of expression recognisable within youth subcultures. In that case, Nigel’s sartorial choices – fashionable or ‘designer labels’ – were a mode of signification denoting membership of a particular lifestyle and an expression of individuality. Nigel was replicating processes young people undertake when they attempt to express their individuality. I questioned Nigel about whether his expressions of a particular style and sartorial choice might be misconstrued:

*You're right, appearance isn't everything, you're quite right. But the kids are quite smart they know the difference between a good teacher and a bad teacher: ... what messages are you giving? ... Opens you to a lot of thoughts ... to what's going on. ... I suppose it's about connecting with them in a way that shows them you can always change, ... improve on yourself and be pleased with the result, ... without totally forgetting who you are, yes, never forget you're still ... unique.*

Nigel's style could be regarded as a 'temporal imagination negotiating its embodied experience' (Bordo 1993, 181) that he re-configured in ways that he believed complemented his notion of professionalism. In that case, his adaptations were significant because he constructed himself as recognisable as 'good' and his adaptations could be read as attempts to cross the cultural divide. An alternative reading is that Nigel is a 'dupe of consumerism'. One cannot discount the idea that his self-image is itself a product of normalisation. However, this would do him a disservice since, within the performance culture and neo-liberal principles infiltrating schools, only certain types of subjectivities were possible. I read that Nigel's deployment of style allows him to purposely engage in informal critical dialogue. His intentional adaptations were always understood as shaped by prevailing and popular discourses operating in the school. By taking up a unique style, Nigel engaged with the everyday practices of the 'neo-liberal mindset' often associated with young people's aesthetic preferences. To quote Butler (2005, 1086), 'in order to change things, we have to be prepared to confront ourselves, to become undone in relation to others, and to accept moments of unknowingness'.

### **Concluding remarks**

assuming the mantle of role model is 'rarely, if ever, a solely individual or completely social matter ... [what] ... seems to be a deeply personal act takes place in a profoundly political environment' (Fisher, 1998, p221).

Teachers as role models is a problematic notion and cannot be uncritically accepted. The approach taken in this article examines the teachers' actions and provides multi-layered readings about the teachers' positioning in the stories that they interpret as meaningful. It proposes a radical departure from traditional role model research that focuses on gender identity binaries, to interrogate identity constructions vis-à-vis race and ethnicity. Shared discursive history is a conceptual frame that foregrounds both cultural identity

construction and the silenced marginalised voice. Shared discursive history is used to contextualise the dynamics of the teachers' relations with pupils, how they signify themselves to B.E.M. pupils and others, perform their pedagogical work, and creatively utilise (seemingly inconsequential) resources. Although assuming they mimic their white counterparts is often unquestioned in teacher role model political discourse, the B.E.M. teachers in this study signified to B.E.M. pupils an alternative model of who they may become. Shared discursive history revealed an equally powerful counter-narrative voiced by these teachers whose perceptions of their transformative role was informed by experiential knowledge about B.E.M. pupils' life-worlds. Their everyday social actions and realities of relating with B.E.M. pupils were entangled with various conflict allegiances and views about membership and exclusion. They performed their roles premised on beliefs about pupils' burgeoning criticality and a sense of accountability. Their actions produced counter-narratives because they chose to perform by modelling conflict resolution. Through the political lens of representation, one can read the teachers' perceptions of their role as alert to opportunities to scaffold pupils' critical thinking. While their role demands the flexibility to respond to events at a moment notice, they viewed such interventions as random opportunities to question the veracity of representations of culture and masculinity in discourse. The interventions were strategic and based on the belief that their actions model crucial, necessary survival skills. The teachers were cognisant of the culminative nature of their actions on pupils' thinking. For the teachers in this article, all of whom self-defined as role models, their positioning strategies with B.E.M. pupils were necessarily complex. Despite the small sample size, the data is rich with stories about the inner and other struggles the B.E.M. teachers in this study encountered. They embody alternate beliefs about, and criteria for what constitutes role modelling. Namely that they have a responsibility to advocate B.E.M. pupils to be(come) mindful and engage in critical enquirers about what it means to have/or make cultural representation. This article proposes further research into, and interrogational studies of B.E. M. teachers who identify with being/becoming a significant role in the lives of B.E.M. pupils.

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