

A monstrous ignorance

Race, schooling and justice¹

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Abstract

‘Justice is the first virtue of all social institutions.’²

This article discusses the astonishing ignorance at all levels as to how Britain has become a multiracial, multicultural society in a post-imperial age, the hostility towards changes in the education system which would help clearer understandings of the imperial past, and the efforts of teachers and other educators to assist in the creation of a socially and racially just society.

Key words: ignorance; race; schools; Empire

Introduction

There is a field of study, agnotology, which is concerned with the deliberate production of ignorance. In the 1970s, two professors at Stanford University in the USA described the way there can be a deliberate cultivation of ignorance, especially in the business or political worlds. A classic perpetuation of ignorance was by the tobacco industry, which over many years denied links between smoking and cancer and even told us smoking was good for us.³ In England, there is a monstrous ignorance perpetuated by an imperial mindset which affects all areas of the school curriculum, an ignorance which is actually now running behind public understanding of the changing nature of a society which is now multiracial, multi-ethnic, multicultural and multifaith. Older white people, especially, find it hard to understand that they were taught that an Empire made Britain ‘Great’, but with the tacit understanding that those living in colonies would stay there. Many still resent the presence of minorities. There was a willing audience for politicians to claim, as Winston Churchill did in 1955, that an election campaign should use the slogan ‘Keep Britain White’. There is still a small but vocal audience supporting groups asserting that it is ‘white culture’ which is under threat.

Despite the efforts of many schools, teachers, parents and others, the curriculum is still basically one designed for a white middle class in imperial times. The persistence of an ethnocentric curriculum has ensured that generations of children have left their schools ignorant and misinformed about the realities of their own society and of Britain’s place in a postcolonial and now post-Brexit world. If education includes the ability to think rationally, reason, make judgments based on evidence and distinguish truth from

falsehood, few of us into the 21st century have been well-served by our understanding of Empire, colonialism and the creation of our current society. There can be no social or racial justice in the society if the crucial institution of education perpetuates ignorance or misinforms the coming generations.

This article discusses the continuation of a curriculum originally influenced by Empire and beliefs that even God was in favour of white supremacy and imperial expansion, as Lord Rosebery claimed in a speech at Glasgow university in 1900. There has been much hostility over the years towards attempts to update the curriculum and a persistence of beliefs in the superiority of traditional 'British' culture and values. The 'British values' all schools are now required to teach are actually the values of any democratic country. An official report by a *Commission on Racial and Ethnic Disparity* in 2021 offered only two pages on teaching an inclusive curriculum, and government guidance on discussion of race and racism presented in 2022 warned against the 'politicisation' of these issues.⁴ Some of the initiatives that schools, teachers and various organisations have attempted to introduce over the years are noted here, along with the continuing hostility or lack of support from politicians and policymakers who still hold imperialist misconceptions of Britain's standing in the world.⁵

Public school influence

The 'public' schools, as Verkaik has noted, helped to write British history and 'became the cheerleaders for colonialism and controlled the narrative of empire'.⁶ From the later 19th century, these schools, essentially for the upper classes, produced political, military, administrative and business leaders, and their traditions of military self-sacrifice and patriotic duty gave rise to many organisations with these values. Among these were the Empire Youth Movement, the Boys' Brigade, the Boy Scouts, school Cadet Corps, the Girls' Patriotic League and a Lads' Drill Association to prepare a fit and healthy working class for the army which was set up by the Eton-education Earl of Meath. In 1912, an Imperial Union of Teachers helped prepare textbooks and atlases of the British Empire. Some of us are old enough to remember the maps on classroom walls with pink bits that 'belonged to us' and an Empire Day, actually suggested by Earl Meath in 1910, that persisted until 1958 when it became Commonwealth Day.

Robert Roberts, brought up in a Salford slum in the early 20th century, remembered his gaunt, blackened primary school building where schooling was made exciting by learning about the oceans and continents, most of which 'seemed to belong to us'. He wrote that teachers copied their public school superiors in fostering an ethnocentric view of imperial greatness and racial superiority. He also pointed out that upper class beliefs in the social inferiority of the working class and the racial inferiority of the colonised came together in a language of 'slum monkeys', and also in the 'cultural

values' of fighting, racism and sexism.⁷

The imperial values of the public schools were disseminated downwards into the grammar schools and elementary schools, and all social classes were encouraged to believe in their economic, political and racial superiority over imperial conquests. The perpetuation of these 'values' goes some way towards explaining the xenophobia, racism and ignorance that is still part of the British heritage and values. Fettes, the Scottish school attended by Tony Blair, defined its boys in the 19th century as 'warrior patriots', and Blair led the country into seven wars during his tenure as prime minister. It still appears that the curriculum of these schools, including Eton, as well as the curriculum in state-maintained schools, has not caught up with post-imperial realities. The officials from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, mainly educated in private schools, who in 2022 helped arrange a Caribbean tour for the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, the Duke being educated at Eton, apparently did not realise that a tour replicating a 1960s royal tour was no longer appropriate, especially as more countries are now contemplating leaving the Commonwealth.⁸

Post-war hostilities

In the restructuring of education in post-war Britain, there were few challenges to its underlying imperial values, despite the arrival of migrants from colonial and former colonial countries to provide an essential workforce in industry, transport and the NHS (National Health Service). The unpreparedness and ignorance of schools and teachers as the children of migrants arrived, and the collusion of all political parties in regarding the children as problems, rather than the school system they were entering, has been well documented over the years. There is a large literature indicating the way injustice and racism permeated all social institutions, including education, and there is now a growing literature describing the disgraceful racist treatment of minorities over the years, written by those who suffered this, as many adults and children still do.⁹

Self-images of Britain as a tolerant country were and are strained as immigration control acts are passed. In 2022, the Law Society criticised the most recent UK immigration control act as damaging access to justice and removing safeguards for refugees and asylum seekers.¹⁰ The late politician still revered by his friends, Enoch Powell, was a populist railing against 'coloured immigration'. He claimed without evidence in 1969 that, due to immigration, the white working class could not obtain houses, hospital beds or school places and had a sense of becoming a 'persecuted minority'. There were at this time some 900,000 migrants in a population of over 56 million, but the claims have resurfaced over the years. Powell opposed the country joining the European Economic Community in 1972 (the EU in 1992), and many Brexit supporters in 2016, echoing Powell, believed false claims about migrants. The failure

of schooling to combat lies and teach truths has had far-reaching consequences.

Despite political hostility, some schools, teachers, local authorities and HMI (Her Majesty's Inspectorate) before Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) worked from the 1960s for curriculum change, and more accurate information about the society which was becoming multiracial and multicultural. New courses, textbooks and teacher training were encouraged. The NUT (National Union of Teachers) published a paper in 1979 asserting that 'the curriculum should have a wide international outlook and the future must lie within an education directed at a multiracial society, not the specific question of educating children from immigrant families', and wrote guidelines on racial stereotyping and an antiracist curriculum.¹¹ The Labour government in 1977 had published a paper claiming that Britain was a multiracial, multicultural country and the curriculum appropriate to our imperial past could not meet the requirements of modern Britain. This government set up a committee to enquire into the education of children from ethnic minority groups which reported after the Conservative government took power, but its recommendations and research were mainly ignored.¹² For example, in 1973 the Schools Council commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research to consider how to prepare pupils for life in a multiracial society. As a senior researcher, Elaine Brittan has written that at this time most 'white' schools thought there were no problems as few or no Black pupils attended and advice was to leave the issue alone. The final report submitted ended up as a version written by the Schools Council in 1981, which in particular left out any discussion of embedded views of race and racism.¹³

Opposition to work attempting to prepare children for the society they were actually living in was intense, with claims that a white British heritage and culture was under attack. Conservative academic Roger Scruton, editing *The Salisbury Review* for 18 years, was especially unpleasant about teachers and others working for curriculum change, and supported claims that western civilisation was at risk. This view is perpetuated in current claims that there are 'culture wars' and 'woke' mindsets.

Despite hostility, Black parents, teachers and community groups were especially active in attempts to influence the curriculum. Supplementary schools flourished to help Black children learn about their heritage and improve their school performance. The idea of a Black History month was taken up by a Ghanaian teacher in 1987 who coordinated projects for the Greater London Council, and ILEA (Inner London Education Authority) produced booklets on racism and sexism. This all irritated prime minister Margaret Thatcher who told the 1987 Conservative party conference that 'children who need to be able to count and multiply are learning antiracist mathematics, whatever that might be' and she abolished the ILEA in 1988. She was also annoyed by education minister Kenneth Baker who gave grants in 1986 to support 'educational needs in a multicultural society'. Baker set up a multicultural task group in 1989, along with all the other subject

groups tasked with producing a national curriculum. The recommendations of the group were ignored, as were many suggestions from the teachers in the subject working groups. The suggestions from the history and maths working groups were singled out as 'skewed' by Mrs Thatcher, as she explained in her memoirs.¹⁴ The Department for Education officials were especially anxious to keep the words 'racism' and 'antiracism' out of documents, and were also concerned to downplay liberal Lord Swann's 807-page report on *Education for All* in 1985, which included a whole chapter on curriculum change.¹⁵ Interestingly, there was even a note in this report on the needs of Ukrainian children with Ukrainian leaders speaking of the 'appalling ignorance' in schools about the children.

Into the 21st century

By 1990, even the editor of *The Times* was sufficiently worried to write in an editorial that 'there seems to be a definite ... attempt to starve multicultural education of resources and let it wither on the vine'. University and local authority courses and resources disappeared during the 1990s, there was no official enthusiasm for examining Britain's place in the world or with new European partners, and a determined attack by right-wing groups on any knowledge that went under the name of multicultural, antiracist, peace studies, global or world studies. All these were, as noted by the chair of the National Curriculum Council, 'no-go areas'. Disparaging any efforts to educate all young people about the multiracial society that they were growing up in continued during the 1990s. Tony Blair claimed a commitment to social justice and to education as a means towards a socially just society, and Sir William Macpherson's 1999 report noted institutional racism in the education system, but by 2001, electoral commitments reverted back to blaming minorities for racial antagonisms and failure to 'integrate'. It became clear that the New Labour government had no new ideas on how a traditional curriculum could become an education for a democratic multicultural society and had no plans to discuss the curriculum, apart from how the content was tested and comparison made of various group achievements. The work of several generations of teachers, local authorities, parents and communities was disregarded.

Schools and teachers during the 21st century continued to be constrained in what could actually be taught, and the focus was always on assessment and achievement in ever-narrowing 'subject' areas rather than on content. The introduction of citizenship education gave some scope for discussion of political and social issues, although Bernard Crick, chair of the government advisory committee on citizenship, advised that ministers should not endorse the notion of antiracism. Michael Gove's 2010 white paper on 'The importance of teaching' included a chapter on curriculum which was mainly about assessment and qualifications.¹⁶ There was a promise to introduce a

more rigorous model of knowledge in core subjects but little discussion of what was actually to be taught. Curriculum reviews followed in 2011, 2013 and 2017 with a similar focus on assessment rather than content. English teachers were especially anxious when reading lists were suggested by ministers, and much Commonwealth, global and 'Black' literature was removed. Gove and his advisers were supporters of the work of American academic E.D.Hirsch whose 'knowledge-rich curriculum', with an emphasis on traditional teaching of 'facts', proved attractive to right-wing politicians and some educationalists.

It is the case that any curriculum comprises a selection of knowledge and facts suggested by those with the power to select. 'Facts' can be imposed by ministers whose own understandings may be contentious. An interesting example was provided by the current education secretary Nadhim Zahawi, born in Iraq, when questioned about his 2022 white paper by the parliamentary select committee on education.¹⁷ He was asked about a balanced curriculum in any teaching about the British Empire. He answered that as an example teachers could explain that although the British had taken over Iraq (and its oil reserves) after the First World War, a positive was that they had governed with an excellent civil service, which sadly was lost when the people of Iraq took over their own government. No member noted that the British habit of looting the resources of other countries was difficult to balance, and former colonised countries had every right to develop their own civil service, although one member of the committee did wonder how teachers could explain any positives about slavery.

Suggestions for curriculum development were made by the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities set up by the government and reporting in March 2021. The report, rumoured to have been heavily influenced by 10 Downing Street, came in for much criticism, especially for repudiating the notion of institutional racism. Black business and media groups were concerned that their input had been 'inconvenient', and some educationalists were surprised to find they had contributed when they had not been approached. The brief discussion on 'teaching an inclusive curriculum' from page 83 of the report suggested teaching classical civilisations, the European Enlightenment, 'new arrivals' after World War 2 (with no mention of the Windrush scandal when new arrivals found themselves deported later) and 'our national story'. Tony Sewell, chair of the Commission, was reported as suggesting an official textbook for all schools to teach 'the truth' about modern Britain, although this was never developed. The report did note that new resources for teachers had been developed during the Covid crisis and home schooling of children. Two examples quoted were an initiative on 'inspiring black people in history' and the Oak National Academy, which had suggested the use of local history to provide examples of multicultural change. There was a suggestion that the DfE set up an independent panel of experts to offer plans, methods and reading for a 'knowledge-rich' curriculum in a multiracial society. This might prove useful

for ministers, especially Kemi Badenoch, the equalities minister, who asserted in parliament in October 2020 that schools should be banned from teaching critical race theory, which she said criticised all white people. While A-level sociology courses in schools do introduce students to a variety of social theories – functionalist, Marxist, feminist, for example – there seems to be little stress on critical race theory. It is actually one of many race theories studied in universities. After much criticism of this report, the government published a plan for the future which was partially welcomed by Halima Begum, CEO of the Runnymede Trust, although she did point out that the country only has one Black chemistry professor.¹⁸

While universities have been in the business of ‘decolonising the curriculum’ for some years, the need for curriculum change and development in schools cannot now be ignored. Major catalysts came from America, with footballer Colin Capernick kneeling before games to protest against racism, and an expansion of the Black Lives Matter movement which dated from 2013 after the murder of Black teenage boy Trayvon Martin and the acquittal of his killer. The movement expanded globally, especially after the appalling murder of George Floyd in 2020 by a white policeman which was witnessed globally, and protests over biased criminal justice systems increased. By 2020, some 26 million people were recorded worldwide as protesting against injustices against minorities and there were over 500 publications on the Black Lives Matter movement.¹⁹ In Britain, the influence of sports people continues to be important. Yorkshire cricketer Azeem Rafiq complained about the racism he suffered from other players, and footballer John Barnes has written his story in *The Uncomfortable Truth About Racism*.²⁰

Improving the curriculum

If the curriculum over the past 10 or more years has become a vehicle for government-approved learning obsessed with transmitting approved knowledge, there are growing signs of opposition, and the development of different and more suitable curriculum resources and materials. This article can only make a few comments as it now needs a whole project to investigate and document all the many initiatives, projects, publications and resources available and developing to date. Much of the recent work available concentrates on the positive presentation of the history, presence and achievements of minorities, and there is now a welcome and expanding amount of literature produced by Black academics, fiction and play writers, journalists, media and social media contributors and many others. The missing ingredient seems to be a more honest focus on white children. Telling the truths about the looting of land and labour and the violence during British imperialism need not, as Caroline Elkins suggests in her recent book, lead to discussion of what was good or bad about Empire, but the current generation of children need to know what actually took place during conquests that

allowed Britain and its white inhabitants to benefit over the years.²¹ Every ‘subject’ in the curriculum can be examined and improved. Examples might be information from The Black Curriculum, the organisation set up by Lavinya Sennett, and the *diverse* curriculum project in Hackney, London which now has some 700 schools signed to teach it.²² Jason Todd, in the Department of Education at Oxford University, has suggested a project on Empire similar to the Holocaust project at UCL in London, and there are now many other suggestions for creating a more suitable curriculum for all children and young people in a multicultural and multiracial, multifaith society.

To bring it all back to the beginning, there can be no social or racial justice, or equal treatment of all people in our society, until the institution of education and all who have a hand in schooling the coming generations, really understand that they have a duty to combat the monstrous ignorance.

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Notes

1. I use ‘monstrous ignorance’ to describe the appalling ignorance in our education system and in reference to William Beveridge’s 1944 call for an attack on it as one of the five ‘giant evils’; this is also noted in my forthcoming book, *Ignorance*, for Agenda Press.
2. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Harvard University Press, 1999, p3.
3. R. N. Proctor and I. Schiebinger, *Agnotology: the making and unmaking of ignorance*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2008.
4. *Commission on Racial and Ethnic Disparities* (The Sewell Report), London, The Cabinet Office/Racial Disparities Unit, March 2021; DfE, *Political Impartiality in Schools*, London, Department for Education, 17 February 2022.
5. Danny Dorling and Sally Tomlinson, *Rule Britannia: Brexit and the End of Empire*, London, Biteback, 2020.
6. R. Verkaik, *Posh Boys. How the English Public Schools Run Britain*, London, One World, 2018; schools are described as ‘public’ if as fee-charging endowed schools they are members of the Headmasters and Headmistresses Conference. They are private schools usually with charitable status.
7. R. Roberts, *The Classic Slum*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1971.
8. K. Malik, ‘As the Imperial ties are being cast aside, a royal tour was always going to be a farce’, *The Observer*, 27 March 2022.
9. See for example: David Olusoga, Yinka Olusoga and Kemi Olusoga, *Black History*

- for Every Day of the Year, London, Macmillan, 2022; Sally Tomlinson, *Race and Education from Empire to Brexit*, Bristol, Policy Press, 2019.
10. The Law Society, *Nationality and Borders Act*, London, Law Society 22 April 2022.
 11. NUT, *In Black and White: Guidelines on racial stereotyping in textbooks and learning materials*, London, National Union of Teachers, 1979.
 12. DES, *Education in Schools: A consultative document* (Green Paper), London, Department for Education and Science, 1977; DES, *West Indian Children in Our Schools* (the Rampton Report), Department for Education and Science, 1981.
 13. E. Brittan, *The inside story, setting the record straight: An inside story about race and education in the 1970s and 1980s*, 2022 (forthcoming).
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 17. Parliamentary Select Committee on Education, 20 April 2022, www.parliamentlive.tv
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 20. J. Barnes, *The Uncomfortable Truth about Racism*, London, Headline Publishing, 2022.
 21. C. Elkins, *Legacy of Violence: A history of the British Empire*, London, Vintage, 2022.
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