

H4 Caldicot Thursday 6 December 09.45 - 10.15

Antiblackness in institutional strategies to overcome race inequality and discrimination (0437)

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Anti-black racism pervades English higher education. Staff and students lacking awareness of structural racism which exists around them is indicative of the pervasiveness of white supremacy to the extent that it is invisible, unmarked, or even ignored (Bain 2018). This is attributed to a majoritarian narrative (Solórzano and Yosso 2002), which upholds the view that education is value-neutral, meritocratic and colour-blind. According to Solórzano and Yosso (2002, 28), the majoritarian narrative is generated ‘from a legacy of racial privilege... in which racial privilege seems “natural”.’ This majoritarian narrative is context-specific and ahistorical leaving the legacy of colonialism, development of eugenics (scientific racism) and slavery unchecked and unaccounted for on ‘race’ matters in England (Bain 2018; Chitty 2009).

With this dominant narrative, ‘race’ inequalities, such as academic achievement, within the English higher education sector are explained away to one’s deficits (see e.g. interview material from higher education staff cited in Stevenson 2012) , to one’s culture (e.g. Cotton, George and Joyner 2013), or one’s social class (Russell Group 2015). This leaves ‘race’, specifically whiteness, unmarked, invisible and taken-for-granted, which simultaneously misrecognises the differences and life experiences of students who are racialized as ‘Black minority ethnic’ (BME).

The constant reification of this majoritarian narrative has writers, such as Dumas (2016) and Stein (2016), argue that education policy and practice (as played out in the USA), reflects antiblackness. In explaining his position, Dumas (2016) elaborated that Black people in the USA were never meant to participate in education given the nation’s origins and

heritage of slavery, Jim Crow and apartheid. The legacy of slavery, of people being considered property and nonhuman, is reflected in perceptions of Black people today particularly in the context of the West (Dumas 2016; Stein 2016).

With this in mind, this conjures questions towards addressing racial inequalities in English higher education, particularly in institutional strategies towards inclusion: Was racism considered and recognised in inclusive policy and practice? If so, what was the extent of universities pushing for race-specific initiatives?

Methods

In comprehending the extent of meaningfulness of inclusion in English higher education policymaking, I drew inspiration from methods employed by both Smith (2012), and Slee and Allan (2001). Smith (2012, 154) discussed reframing as a decolonising method, in regards to how a problem or issue is defined, which then determines how best to solve the problem. For her, social problems that impact indigenous communities are never solved due to the ways they have been framed with history ignored:

‘[governments and social agencies] have framed indigenous issues in the ‘indigenous problem’ basket, to be handled in the usual cynical and paternalistic manner... Many indigenous activists have argued that such things as mental illness, alcoholism and suicide, for example, are not about psychological and individualized failure but about colonization or lack of collective self-determination (Smith 2012, 154).

Similarly, the dominant discourse of the achievement gap issue in England is attributed to one’s cultural deficits, which in turn determines that the solution has to be related to ‘them’ overcoming their deficits. Thus, there is a need to *reframe* the gap achievement issue that accounts for the legacy of white supremacy and colonial exploits of England. This reframing complements a deconstructed reading method employed by Slee and Allan (2001) in their work of progressing inclusive education.

The work presented here reframes, taking on a deconstructive approach on reading race equality action plans of six English universities. These universities were chosen as their work on race equality has been positively recognised throughout the sector by a leading national higher education organisation. I am keeping the name of this organisation anonymous as the six universities will be identifiable. The six institutional race equality actions plans have been made publicly available by the national organisation.

There are three reasons for taking a reframed, deconstructed approach. First, this approach allows for matters of ‘race’ to be foregrounded, which is consistent with the tenets of critical race theory (CRT) (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; Solórzano and Yosso 2001; 2002). Second, in being a counternarrative, it is aligned with ‘refusal’ work (Tuck and Yang 2014). This entails not reproducing the colonial practice of researching ‘down’ – the marginalised, the racialized, the disabled, the classed and the gendered. Thus, this examination of texts below is an instance of researching ‘up’. Finally, the work conducted here exposes exclusion as it is inscribed within inclusive education policies (Slee and Allan 2001), with a goal of addressing and eliminating racial oppression (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995). In framing the issue of race inequality in higher education, there is a question as to the extent of exclusionary language used in inclusive policy institutional documents. There is a question as to what is culturally recognised and valued.

Preliminary thoughts

Some findings have already emerged that university strategy documents, for the most part, emphasise a value-neutral, inclusive approach towards addressing race inequality. Race-specific initiatives were limited. The paper concludes that race neutral, colour blind initiatives to tackle the English higher education sector ‘BME achievement gap’ issue reproduces misrecognition of cultural differences and ignoring the racialized experiences of

students of colour. This is exemplified in the symbolic appropriation of notions of inclusion and inclusive practice within institutional policy statements. Meanings attached to inclusion and inclusive practice, for the most part, did not account for racialized experiences.

Recognising cultural differences in the university classroom is important.

Recognising cultural differences in conjunction with an awareness of how whiteness, white supremacy, structures lives, is perhaps more significant. To counter the majoritarian view of a value neutral, colour-blind inclusion, I reiterate the challenge of Dumas (2016, 16) in marking the everyday ill effects of whiteness in education that reproduces an antiblackness that casts Black children and young people as ‘uneducable’, ‘unworthy of education’, ‘nonhuman.’ Classrooms have to allow space for honest dialogues on matters of ‘race’ particularly the notion of antiblackness that is not only meshed in the fibres of USA education, but in English higher education.

References

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