Open dialogue. Seeking equality of educational outcomes for Black students: A personal account.

Response to commentaries

Louise Taylor

Introduction

It was with some trepidation that I opened the email containing the responses to my piece. As I read the commentaries, I experienced a combination of emotions: I felt validated and commended by my efforts so far, as well as shocked and uncomfortable by some of my mistakes and biases that were pointed out. The commentators had a mix of lived experiences of racism, scholarly understanding of racism, and practical knowledge of how to develop anti-racist practice. I have found these commentaries incredibly helpful in enabling me to discover the unconscious biases still present in my thinking, and to enable me to consider what work I still need to do. Most of the commentators are substantially more experienced than me in this work, and have a much greater understanding and appreciation of the issues that I wrote about in my opening dialogue. I still have much to learn, as their responses have correctly pointed out. By writing about my experiences, my intention is to provide guidance and encouragement for more educators to think about and develop anti-racist practice. As such, I hope to be able to act as a bridge between those with greater experience, and individuals like myself who are just beginning their journey towards anti-racist practice.

The scale of the challenge to improve the experiences and educational outcomes for Black students is undoubtedly large, but I believe that it is achievable if we all take responsibility for educating ourselves about racism and taking necessary steps to overcome it. I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to all of the commentators for the time they took in responding to my journey so far, for sharing their personal experiences, and for encouraging and guiding me and others who want to continue this work. I will now consider each of the commentaries in turn, offering my response and further reflections as I continue my efforts towards anti-racist practice.

Reply to Boyle

Boyle's response has provided me with some substantive issues to consider, which require further reflection and action by me; these reflections have been uncomfortable, and writing about them here requires me to overcome feelings of embarrassment and vulnerability. Addressing racism requires facing up to these feelings of fragility, learning from them, and taking action to change behaviour. First, I made two substantive mistakes that Boyle rightly pointed out. She noted that I did not explicitly define my identity as white but described myself as being raised in a 'white family'. This is interesting because my intention was to make my identity as a white person clear, but I can see now that I failed to do so. This could be due, as Boyle notes, to whiteness being historically 'unnamed and unnoticed as a hegemonic norm'. Boyle then cites Mazzei (2011: 659), explaining that 'a failure to voice whiteness, or put differently, the choice to articulate one's white identity by not doing so, is a strategy for maintaining power through a move to maintain the normative (and unspoken) presence of whiteness'. I can't say that by not voicing my whiteness I was deliberately trying to maintain power, but I acknowledge that this lack of being explicit about my whiteness was an omission which serves to reinforce Boyle's point.

The second error that Boyle pointed out was my assumption that the Black and Global Majority students (Boyle's term) involved in our research had either 'spent most of their lives living in Britain' or 'had recently moved to the UK to study', as opposed to being born here. Upon seeing this error pointed out, I felt chastened. Despite my knowing that being British includes being Black, I think that this mistake highlights the hegemonic assumption of British as white. I am sorry for making this mistake, but having it pointed out to me has made me conscious to prevent myself from making it again in the future.

Boyle also raised the fact that addressing racism through our research arose because of a desire by me and others in my institution to address degree outcome gaps between Black and white students, as opposed to addressing these students' experiences. Our emphasis on degree-outcome gaps is undeniable and was a key motivator (this also appears to be the case across the sector, e.g., Loke, 2020; UUK/NUS, 2019). I agree with Boyle that it is

concerning that outcomes seem more important than improving student experiences. Based on my own practice, degree outcomes naturally seem to improve when their experience improves, thus intervening to support their experience may serve these students well going forward.

There are a number of useful critiques that Boyle makes regarding our research study (Bunce et al., 2021) and my description, or lack of. First, I want to clarify that the students were interviewed by a member of staff who identified as 'BAME', not a white member as Boyle feared, and this interviewer was independent from the students' course of study. That way, students were able to talk more openly about their experiences. I was also aware of the potentially difficult nature of recalling experiences of racism for the participants. To address this, students were provided with information about sources of support during the research process. However, with hindsight, I did not fully appreciate the potentially traumatic nature of these students' experiences, hence me finding their stories 'shocking and deeply saddening' (with Boyle also recognising that this type of research can be painful 'for both Black and White researchers'). Although many students commented on the cathartic nature of the focus groups and valued being heard, I can now appreciate more fully the potential costs of asking these students to recount their experiences of racism.

I had not, however, considered the potentially traumatising effect of leading the focus groups on the members of staff. Boyle points out that 'Black researchers are often "triggered" by such work as one is required to possibly recall previous and often traumatic events. Or alternatively they connect with the narrative of the participant and draw similarities in feeling.' It is difficult to reconcile this issue with the need for Black researchers to conduct research with Black participants for the reason outlined above. However, the members of staff involved on this occasion were fully informed as to the nature of the focus groups, and agreed to lead them voluntarily. They also seemed to appreciate the need for the groups in order to give these students a voice. Nonetheless, these issues raised in Boyle's response means that I will provide more substantive support for Black researchers if I conduct future research of this kind, which could include more thorough briefings, debriefings, and access to support networks.

To address another of Boyle's concerns about the purpose of the research, the main aim was to understand these students' experiences with the intention to implement changes to improve the degree awarding gap. The participants were informed that this was a key purpose of the research; it was not merely an information-gathering exercise. Understandably, participants feared that little would be done to address their concerns. I want to reassure those students and readers that, over the last five years since the research was conducted, our program has undergone, and continues to undergo, significant change to develop anti-racist practice that benefits all students, and specifically aims to improve the experiences and outcomes for Black students (Chenyika et al., 2021). In doing this work, our program has taken a Critical Race Theory perspective, defined by Boyle as a 'broader perspective that addresses history, settings, and White self-interest in addition to the role of emotions and the unconscious.' We have also shared our work across the sector, driven by our desire to promote racial and social justice (for example I have written a blog for Advance HE summarising things that educators can do to develop anti-racist practice, see Taylor Bunce, 2021).

Reply to Gillborn and Gillborn

Gillborn and Gillborn begin their response with an important reminder that the Race Relations (Amendment) Act (RRAA) of 2000 placed a statutory duty on universities to 'eliminate unlawful racial discrimination'. I would like to add that our obligation is also a moral one. This makes it more concerning, as Gillborn and Gillborn note, that it has taken a further two decades since the RRAA for issues around racial equality in our higher education institutions (and society more generally) to become 'mainstream'. I agree that there is no excuse for the delayed action, and that racism in higher education is often 'subtle and unrecognized', reflecting assumptions, discourses, and actions that assure and centre the 'interests, fears and fantasies' of white people. They argue that the delay may be explained by white ignorance and the belief in *apparent* white benefits that arise from upholding the status quo. I have added the term apparent because it is recognised that enabling all people to fulfil their potential benefits everyone, including white people.

Gillborn and Gillborn continue their response by reminding us all of the damaging ways in which psychologists have been responsible for, and continue to be responsible for perpetuating racism, in both research and teaching. I want to thank them for drawing together many concrete examples of this, which should encourage us all to reflect and adapt our own practices in a collective effort to fight racism. The example of 'drapetomania', a mental illness attributed to enslaved Africans who were attempting to escape slavery, is one particularly emotive example that Gillborn and Gillborn cite to demonstrate the use of 'science' to pathologise behaviour that threatened white supremacy. They further explain that psychological knowledge continues to be generated by white, Western researchers, with Euro-US populations, and that psychological research positions people of colour as deviant from the norm or as having an inherent deficit (perhaps the most widespread and entrenched example that they give of this is IQ). Unsurprisingly, psychology research then informs psychology curricula that subsequently reproduces racism by failing to grasp the opportunity to engage students critically with these issues.

Gillborn and Gillborn also criticise Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which I used in our research to understand the extent to which 'BME' students experienced fulfilment of the psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Gillborn and Gillborn argued that, 'in its claims to universalism, [SDT] negates the significance of intracultural divides and inequities'. They also argue that it could be described as 'race evasive', using Annamma et al.'s (2017) term to describe wilful ignorance of the experiences of people of colour, and an attempt to 'obliterate' race. Gillborn and Gillborn raise a critical point: when adopting a theoretical perspective, we run the risk of perpetuating the privileged position of WEIRD (Western, Educated, and from Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic countries) perspectives. This has caused me to re-visit the theory and critically consider its claims to universalism.

In SDT, a psychological need is defined as a '*nutrient* that is essential for an individual's adjustment, integrity, and growth' (Ryan, 1995, cited by Vansteenkiste et al., 2020, p. 6). One of the nine criteria for inclusion of a psychological need is that it is *universal*, that is, 'relevant for individuals regardless of their demographic characteristics' including age,

nationality, gender, personality and cultural background (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020, p. 6). The theory recognises that the pathways to need fulfilment will differ across these factors, and that need satisfaction will contribute to wellbeing, whereas need frustration will lead to ill health. The theory also emphasises the critical role of socio-cultural factors in supporting or thwarting individuals' need fulfilment. It is this part of the theory that was particularly important for our research because it placed the experience of need fulfilment (or lack of it) on the teaching environment, not on the students themselves. Our use of the theory as an analytical framework revealed the extent to which aspects of the learning and teaching environment negatively impacted on need fulfilment, and this had a powerful impact on promoting us to change our teaching practices.

It is right that claims of universality should be interrogated, although there is not space to examine this in detail here. Amongst the vast and complex research literature on SDT, there is evidence to support universality of the three psychological needs, as fundamental set human attributes. Proponents of the theory argue that the impact of need fulfilment on wellbeing is 'universally positive' because this aligns with 'intrinsic growth tendencies of human nature' (Chirkov et al., 2005, p. 426). There is also a body of cross-cultural research using SDT that examines the ways that culture supports or thwarts psychological need fulfilment (e.g., Church et al., 2013; Sheldon et al, 2004; Vansteenkiste et al., 2005). This literature generally concludes that, regardless of the individualistic or collectivistic nature of the culture, experiencing one's behaviour as more autonomous (volitional/self-determined) is universally more conducive to healthy human functioning (Chirkov et al., 2005). By conducting research, we can test the ability of SDT to explain racial inequalities by using it as a lens to understand how prejudicial environments impact upon individuals. SDT would predict that, in environments whereby individuals are subjected to racism, they are unlikely to experience fulfilment of their psychological needs, which will have a negative impact on wellbeing. This is what we found in our study (Bunce et al., 2021).

To start to overcome the challenge of eliminating racism in psychology, Gillborn and Gillborn cite a website that S. Gillborn and colleagues have developed at Leeds Beckett University called 'BME Psychology: Diversifying psychology away from its white, western bias', available at www.bmepsychology.com. I previously found this resource invaluable for

information when beginning my attempt to decolonise my teaching. It helped me to overcome the fears associated with a lack of knowledge and not knowing where to start. If you feel overwhelmed by the need to make your teaching anti-racist, my advice would be to start small. For example, can you find some Black, Arab, Asian, or indigenous psychologists whose work you could present, or a research study that addresses racism (e.g. bmepsychology.com discusses Clark and Clark's (1939) study of Black and white children's preference for Black and white dolls, which went on to influence the ending of educational segregation rules in a U.S. Supreme Court case). I'm not saying that this is sufficient for eliminating racism in our educational institutions, but it is at least one step further down the path that educators should take to enable all students to fulfil their potential.

Reply to Minton

Minton's response echoed many points I made in my article. His personal reflections on his journey towards decolonising his research and teaching were encouraging because they mirrored some of the challenges and experiences that I too have faced. I appreciate the collegiate nature of his response and his recognition that adversarial dialogue is unhelpful. Minton's response made me consider further the issue of decolonising the curriculum and my own advances (or not) in this area.

The definition of decolonisation cited by Minton from Bhambra, Gebrial and Nişancioğlu (2018) gave me pause for thought and I found it extremely helpful in continuing my thinking on this issue. The definition has 'two key referents': 'First, it is a way of thinking about the world which takes colonialism, empire and racism as its empirical and discursive objects of study; it re-situates these phenomena as key shaping forces of the contemporary world, in a context where their role has been systematically effaced from view. Second, it purports to offer alternative ways of thinking about the world and alternative forms of political praxis'. Minton later reflects that we need to 'acknowledge and adjust the types of knowledge that we privilege, and to make fundamental changes to power relationships, especially (for those of us involved in university settings) those that are evidenced in the research that we undertake, supervise and refer to in our processes of teaching and learning.'

Over the last few years in my teaching, I have been particularly conscious of the texts, videos, and images that I present to my students in terms of who they portray and how. I have tried to increase the representation of Black people and voices (such as Dr Keon West discussing prejudice) as well as including academics who provide a critical perspective on issues of race (see www.bmepsychology.com for resources). But, despite my best intentions, I have to admit that the key theories of psychological development on which I still rely in my teaching and research were developed by WEIRD researchers and involved WEIRD populations. Perhaps what I have actually achieved to date could be more accurately described as 'internationalising' or 'diversifying' but still has a long way to go in terms of being truly decolonising.

I take encouragement from Minton's response to be braver, and this year I will further attempt to prioritise other perspectives with a view to more truly decolonising. For example, in our teaching team we have begun to engage with the models of 'Ikibiri' and 'Ubuntu' (Childs & Pike, 2021). Ikibiri comes from the East African country of Burundi, and describes the process of working together, providing mutual assistance to solve problems (Muchiri & Murekasenge, 2019). Similarly, the concept of 'Ubuntu', in essence, links the individual to the collective, and emphasises sharing and exercising humanity towards others (Mupedziswa et al., 2019). Both of these models offer alternative perspectives to social psychological theories developed to explain some of the phenomenon seen in individualistic cultures. In teaching about models developed within different cultural contexts, I will attempt the process that Minton helpfully makes explicit, and which I think we should all take heed: 'We must first acknowledge the choices we have made, and we continue to make, and what we continue to privilege; and then make meaningful changes'.

Reply to Moncrieff

The title of Moncrieff's response brought back memories of sitting uncomfortably, cross-legged, on the dusty wooden floor of the gym in our primary school for assembly, and singing 'When I needed a Neighbour' and other similar hymns. The fact that I can still recall the tune and many of the words suggests that we sung it regularly, perhaps, as Moncrieff

points out, as a method of teaching about 'social justice [and] human kinship in supporting one another despite our religious, ethnic, or skin colour differences'. It is hugely unfortunate then, that, as a young child, I had absolutely no idea what the words 'creed' and 'colour' meant in this context, let alone any real understanding of racism and its consequences. I wonder to what extent other children understood the words? Being exposed to such hymns by our teachers, while in itself was probably well-intentioned, seems an insufficient way to educate young children about racism and how to prevent it.

Moncrieff asked me some questions regarding the 'one Black child' with whom I attended primary school. Sadly, my answers to these questions suggest that she will have endured a sense of isolation and othering as a result of her skin colour, which would have hindered any attempts she will have made towards assimilation and integration. I recall her being on the margins of the school community, as was her mum who took her to and from school. I would be surprised if she did not feel that her skin colour was 'hyper visible'. Approximately thirty years later, and I'm in a different type of classroom, with distant views of dreaming spires, and, yet, little seems to have changed regarding the experiences of Black students. Despite strides made by Oxford University and other universities in widening participation to attract Black students, many of these students are subsequently failed by institutional racism and a failure to deliver anti-racist pedagogy: for example, some students from the Oxford University African and Caribbean Society reported that they were no longer willing to contribute to outreach initiatives owing to the discrepancy between public statements against racism by their university and their lived experiences; another student referred to being treated as a 'second-class' citizen in their college (Weale, 2020).

In my own university, the experiences of our Black students is arguably not much better. In our research (Bunce et al., 2021), we heard several examples of racism encountered by our students from lecturers and their peers, as well as in teaching materials, pedagogic processes, and university systems. Moncrieff asks me to what extent do I think that the experiences of my Black students are any different to that of the 'one Black child' at my primary school? Sadly, the answer is probably 'not very much'. However, the changes that I, along with my colleagues, have started implementing as a result of our research are making a difference: at a program level, we have made significant strides towards understanding

what aspects of our provision are negatively impacting Black students, and we are listening and acting upon feedback from these students. Moncrieff is rightly concerned that some university initiatives might be a knee-jerk reaction to events over the last couple of years that have highlighted institutional racism in Britain. I am pleased to say that I believe that I am part of a university that is genuinely seeking to transform its practices to work towards equality of outcomes for Black students. Only time will tell if this is the case.

Reply to Obiakor

Reading about Obiakor's personal background and the enduring 'rude, ignorant, racist, xenophobic' experiences he faces as Black man working in academia the United States only serves to increase the sense of urgency to address racism. I am thankful for Obiakor's position that my 'White voice is very critical in the discourse on race, culture, and language' and also that he sees merit in my story so that others can learn from it. He rightly argues that 'all voices are needed to solve the endemic problems confronting Black students' and I call on everyone to work towards this.

Obiakor rightly points out that my opening quote by Kendhi, which encourages us to admit when we are being racist, does not go far enough; it 'scotches the snake, but does not kill it'. Reflecting on my use of Kendhi's quote perhaps illustrates where I feel that I am on my anti-racist journey – I am still learning what is racist (with thanks to some commentators for pointing out some of my unintentional racism) and developing the courage to admit it when I am. This is where change needs to start to happen because without first being able to recognise our own acts of racism, we won't be able to address them.

I was saddened to read about Obiakor's experiences of working collegiately with white colleagues who were open to talking and writing about multiculturalism, but whose actions were far removed from their words. It is difficult to reconcile these contradictions. Obiakor rightly describes whiteness in this context as a 'loaded weapon' of 'power and privilege', and it is clear in his examples that this loaded weapon was consciously being used against him. His examples serve to reinforce the important distinction between words and deeds: anti-racist practice needs to go beyond talk, or being a simple 'tick-box' exercise. So, what

should we be doing? Obiakor explains that 'Black people need what other people need with added doses of racial, cultural, and linguistic sensibilities and sensitivities. But, strategies for providing these needs must be intentional, proactive, measurable, and multidimensional'. I will echo and summarise five major race-centered issues that Obiakor proposes that higher education leaders need to enact to support Black students: 1) reconsider how to assess academic ability, avoiding white norms and values against which to evaluate Black students, 2) critically interrogate prejudicial assumptions and so called 'facts' about Black people, 3) participate in brave conversations about race within our institutions, and recognise and value effective leadership by Black and white individuals doing this work, 4) avoid making stereotypes relating to self-concepts, such as Black pupils having a negative self-concept; recognise the changing nature of 'self' in relation to the environment and provide healthy, progressive environments, 5) hire and promote Black leaders to give visibility and voice to the Black community. I believe that engaging with these issues will support the development of the 'global village' in which all human beings can feel included and prosper.

Reply to Whigham and Arday

Like Gillborn and Gillborn, Whigham and Arday were concerned with our use of Self-Determination Theory as a universal framework for understanding human needs; please see my reply to Gillborn and Gillborn for a response. Whigham and Arday provide a timely reminder of the work of bell hooks on intersectionality. It is deeply worrying that the recent government report from its Commission for Race and Ethnic Disparity (2021) ignores the intersectionality of race and class, and tries to explain away racial inequalities in educational outcomes with class inequalities. The report ignores, for example, that Black Caribbean and Black African boys from high socio-economic status (SES) families have poorer outcomes than white boys from high SES families. In doing this, the report appears to absolve our institutions of responsibility for addressing the disparities, and, instead, places the deficit on those individuals affected.

Whigham and Arday also provide a serious reminder about the risks of homogenising by referring to 'all Black students', noting the importance of considering individual differences in agency as well as the intersection between agency and structures that create racism. I

would argue that considering agency provides a more empowering approach to learning and teaching for these students, and appears to suggest partnership with these students for overcoming racism (not doing 'to' or doing 'for'). This is in line with the Burundian principle of 'Ikibiri', as I discussed in my reply to Minton, meaning working together to provide mutual assistance (Muchiri & Murekasenge, 2019).

Whigham and Arday also place an emphasis on white reflexivity, and refer to Whigham's own self-reflective journey as a white academic and anti-racist educator, which, like me, 'remains in its embryonic phase'. It's comforting to know that I'm not alone. They also suggest that I reflect on my informal education and witnessing of racism in childhood. Thinking back, my childhood recollections of racism were that it was used as a form of humour between white people, meaning that I grew up viewing it as an acceptable way to make jokes. I cringe at these types of jokes now, but I haven't yet worked out how to respond in a way that confronts the racism – this is a work in progress.

I'm not sure that I want to share my ongoing flaws and failures, as suggested by Whigham and Arday, although some of them are evident in this special edition. I will admit, however, that I was recently called-out for making a stereotypical statement about a particular ethnic group (with no conscious mal-intent), but for which I realised I needed to apologise. This highlights the ongoing nature of learning to be anti-racist, but each mistake provides a learning opportunity if we are open and willing, despite any discomfort that arises from it (and I did experience a lot of discomfort).

Whigham and Arday complete their response by highlighting some specific pedagogical challenges and recommendations for anti-racist education. I want to thank them for these, for example, raising the issue that discussions of race are not always appropriate, particularly when they may benefit white students more than Black students. They also reminded me that discussions on race should always 'be situated pedagogically and have a clearly identifiable educational purpose for all students'. I further agree with them that decolonising the curriculum has practical challenges due to centuries-long histories of racial inequalities in many of our academic disciplines, and that it is not enough simply to diversify reading lists and lecture slides. Decolonising requires meaningful long-term, sustained

effort. There is one point they make that I want to consider, which is that 'white academics should wherever possible defer to those who can teach from a position of knowledge on racism and ethnic discrimination'. I agree that someone with lived experience will be able to provide a qualitatively richer education on racism, but, at the same time, I believe that white educators should get themselves into a position where they are knowledgeable to teach about this topic. Giving this work to Black people may be, as Dr Boyle suggests, 'triggering', and, as others have criticised, put an unfair burden of labour on Black people to fight against racism. These issues require careful balancing.

Final thoughts: Challenges, and a call to action

I want to thank all of the commentators once again for their thought-provoking responses that have substantially advanced my own thinking, and hopefully that of the reader. This exercise has filled in some gaps in my knowledge, encouraged me to reflect further, and re-energised me to continue to develop anti-racist practice. Whether you are motivated by our duty to reduce the degree outcome gap, or to improve the quality of educational experiences of Black students, I call on all educators (particularly those who, like me, have white privilege) to confront racism and make their teaching truly anti-racist. Only then can we begin to undo the systematic neglect of Black students and begin to create an equitable education system.

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