

## THE NORMALIZED INVISIBILITY OF BLACK AGENCY WITHIN THE SCHOOLING SYSTEM IN ENGLAND

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### Summary

This paper picks up the thread of the authors' research from our previous papers inquiring into the disempowerment and subsequent disillusion of the Black aspirants to a significant role in the UK's teaching profession. Having tracked the situation in Liverpool [Boyle & Charles 2011, 2016] we decided to look at the capital and selected one of the London Authorities as an alternative location. We selected Newham principally because the Authority is reported to have the most ethnically diverse teaching population in the thirty-three London Authorities [Demie & Hau 2022:]. The aim of the research was to survey the self-reported experiences of Newham's current Black teachers [i] through their own journeys as Black students in the UK schooling system and then [ii] as Black teachers working within the UK schooling system.

**Keywords:** *black educators, education system, ethnic diversity, inequality, discrimination, social justice, United Kingdom, Liverpool, London, Newham.*

### Introduction

This paper follows on from the authors' previously published research papers on the disempowerment and subsequent disillusion of the Black aspirants to a significant role in the UK's teaching profession. Having tracked the situation of Black teachers in Liverpool [Boyle & Charles 2011, 2016], we decided to focus on the capital and selected one of the London Authorities as an alternative location. We selected Newham principally because the Authority is reported to have the most ethnically diverse teaching population in the thirty-three London Authorities [Demie & Hau 2022]. The aim of the research study was to survey the self-reported experiences of Newham's current Black teachers [i] through their journeys as Black students in the UK schooling system and then [ii] as current Black teachers working within the UK schooling system in a London Local Authority.

### Process

Through scrutiny of the DFE database, all the Newham Primary and Secondary phase schools were identified and approached. Each one was sent a formal invitation letter stating our provenance, the purpose and process of the research, assurances of anonymity and confidentiality for participation, and with sufficient teacher questionnaires for each of the schools' Black teaching population. Teachers were asked to state their role/teaching position and how that related to a senior leadership role; their experience as a Black child/learner during their own schooling years; their experiences as a Black

teacher both in their previous schools and in their current Newham school [hence the emphasis by the researchers on anonymity and confidentiality].

Responses were steady, but slow incoming [as usually experienced in centre-periphery, researcher-school surveys] and therefore a comprehensive process of following up with reminder letters and questionnaires was carried out. The cut-off date for responses was extended to enable completion of data logging, data-cleaning, and a more in-depth, centre-periphery model survey analysis located within relevant research literature to be compiled and completed. No follow-ups to the questionnaire [e.g., face-to-face, semi structured interviews, case studies etc.] survey were costed into this phase of the project, so costing in the opportunities to enrich the self-reported data is a potential take-forward from this phase of the research.

Disappointingly, the responses, and therefore the profile presented in this paper, were totally primary phase [for avoidance of doubt, we had nil secondary phase teacher responses]. This is despite the initial invitation to take part in the anonymized survey, to respond/complete questionnaires and the subsequent reminders being sent to both primary and secondary phases of schools across Newham Authority.

### **Commentary**

The authors' review of the content of the received responses indicates a self-reported profile of experiences very similar to those that the authors researched and published in their 2016 review and further replicates the evidence presented in their even earlier Journal of Black Studies paper [Boyle & Charles 2011, 2016]. The authors note that this Newham profile can only be reported and confirmed within the limits of the sample responses received.

From the responses of the 30 primary phase teachers who reported their experiences, there is minimal representation reported at the Senior Leadership grades [only two responses from within the Executive Headteacher/ Headteacher/Principal/Assistant Headteacher grades].

The majority [85%] of all the received responses registered the trail of experiences of racism [in a variety and range of forms, both in the respondents' own schooling experiences and in the respondents' subsequent own professional teaching experiences] that our 2016 Journal of Inclusive Education paper [above] reported. These responses included, [for example, fuller details below] as current teachers, being ignored by parents and being viewed as Teaching Assistants not as 'proper' teachers, being overlooked for promotions, overlooked for development courses or further training, and even denied access and inclusion in within-school policy conversations. Experiences of the teacher-respondents' own 'student/schooling' years included being ridiculed, stereotyped, abused, and lacking in learning support from teaching staff because [as reported by the sample] of a Black student stereotypical profile of inherent behavioural issues and low expectations.

### **Data and Description**

This descriptive section of our paper has two main parts and relevant sub-sections. Firstly, responses which evidence the responding teachers' personal experiences as they progressed as students through the schooling system. Secondly, the responding teachers' professional experiences as teachers/teaching assistants within that schooling system.

To preserve school/teacher anonymity and confidentiality, the sample teacher responses included in the two following sections are presented and identified only as those responses are coded on the anonymized research database.

***Personal experiences while progressing through the schooling system as a Black student.***

***[i] Teacher respondents' sample comments:***

**Teacher expectations**

Black girl/boy students were reprimanded ['spoken to'] more than students from other ethnic groups [062A], specifically more than the Asian group students.

In school growing up, I would say that teacher expectations [for Black children/students] were generally not as high as they could have been. Some teachers saw my potential, but it was normally within arts, creativity, or sports. I did not have role models. I don't remember experiencing overt racism however I remember feeling like not much was expected of me, and I wasn't 'stretched'. [019B] If your behaviour was considered hard to manage, you were moved to a group below your ability [027B]

**Racial abuse or derision**

Afro-Caribbean hairstyles were made fun of [cornrows/plaits] [019C]. I was given a public certificate in assembly for confidence, while, ironically, I was being told at the same time that 'I was pretty for a black girl' by my teacher. [017B]

At school I was named-called and even once attacked because of the colour of my skin. This helped me to develop resilience though. I was described as a N\*\*\*\* on many occasions. I was in the top sets for most subjects but lots of the other black children were not in my set ever. [044B]. I frequently experienced verbal racial abuse when I was at secondary school [054C].

My school had very few children from ethnic minority. black Caribbean groups so I experienced name calling at school [025A]. Personally, I had a lot growing up. Growing up name-calling, fights, not being included etc....[063A].

***[ii] Family members of respondent Black teachers' sample comments:***

It is important to note that the schooling experiences of the majority of these teachers would not have been in Newham. Therefore, to provide some sample evidence of the current situation for Black students in Newham schools we asked the responding teachers to report the experiences of their own children [and/or close family members] as they grew up within/progressed through the schooling system.

**Racial Abuse**

My cousin (mixed race male) experienced obvious prejudice from adults when in secondary school. This was reduced after my mum went to the school and spoke to the Deputy Headteacher [062A].

No, not that I know. My child has never reported any incidents to me. [019A].

Yes, my children and family members experienced racism in school, for example: overt/covert name-calling [027A] Yes, they have been called names by other children. [067C].

I am not sure of overt racism, but my son was called various inappropriate names. I have heard other black children referred to as 'disgusting' and that piece of shit, when spoken about by another member of staff. This staff member is senior, my nieces and nephews have previously struggled to be accepted. They try to be better than others as they tend to be told

off/criticized the most. All of my family members have experienced racism, and that statement was said in front a white senior member staff who said nothing. [027D].

My nieces and nephews have previously struggled to be accepted. They try to be better than others as they tend to be told off/criticized the most. All of my family members have experienced racism [064B].

My children at school especially in Primary did on occasions experience racism. They were able to discuss it with me and then went and dealt with it. [025D]

Not my children, but my family members (the older generation) have experienced overt/covert name calling and have been given less opportunities at their workplaces, such as being overlooked for promotions [063A].

### **Low expectations**

Generally, my children have not been challenged in their learning as they are more able. School expectations have been [at times] low and one of my children has experienced unfair treatment from teachers. [049B] A pupil from Bangladeshi background used the N\*\*\*\* word but then changed it! My daughter said that the teachers believed him because he was seen as a well-behaved child. [059B]

My son was considered as working below expectation due to behaviours. The following year, he moved to working above expectations! The teacher apologized to me and said that she made a stereotypical judgement, so she stopped trying. Even though his test scores and general work were above average. [037B]

My son was a high achiever who was never challenged while in primary school. If he put his hand up, he was called 'Mr. Know It All'. He was spoken about unkindly in the classroom and one staff member told me to get my son out of that school. In High School one white staff member said, 'everyone sees one Einstein, but I don't'. My son had to leave his high Maths set and go to a third set because a teacher said he could not cope with him in the high set. [027D]

When my children were at school, they didn't have enough role models (black). Teacher expectations were low at times as they were encouraged to do sports. [063A] Teacher expectation wasn't that high, my older son (32 years old now) wasn't pushed at all, he self-motivated as he was so interested in learning at a young age [033B]

### ***Professional experiences as a Black teacher working in the Newham schooling system.***

Although, I have climbed to the level of Assistant Headteacher and have been given coaching and sent on training courses, I have had to do a lot of hard work to be considered 'ready' for such development [019A]

I have generally had a very positive experience at this school, which is definitely a very welcoming and inclusive space. I do not believe that staff discriminate against one another, or students based on racism or ethnicity. [044C]. I have worked in 3 schools in Newham over 20 years and have [not] experienced any.[063B]

Personally, I haven't had any incidents. I have worked in Newham for 20 years and I have never been discriminated because of my colour. [063A]

### **Lack of support and identity as a professional Black teacher**

There always have been many excuses when I have to ask white teaching assistants to do a job. An assumption that you are overly sensitive or difficult to work with. Senior staff member jesting to cut my hair [I have 'locks']. White staff talking to me in a slang or Caribbean accent for no reason. Presuming that when I am off, I am somehow skiving, even though when they check on record, I have 100% attendance. Parents assuming that I am the Teaching Assistant and talking to the white Teaching Assistant instead of me. [027A]

Parents ignoring me and talking to my white TA. Parents ignoring me and talking to another adult that was white. [027C]

I do feel that at times my skin-tone has contributed to colleagues' responses [027B]

I hear comments in the office about a child – whether they are 'proper British'. When asked to do a task by email with an individual, always a member of senior management is copied in to show the presumption that I am difficult. All my teaching methods are questioned. The presumption that I am strict or mean - in a way, that is why my students are well behaved, not that I am skilled in behaviour management. I am a quiet individual and shy, this is perceived as having a bad attitude by comparison with other white or Asian staff. I am just being courteous. [027A]

Some parents [mostly Asians, who are Muslims] assume that the Teaching Assistant is the class teacher and would approach her [instead of me, the actual teacher]. One time, an eastern European parent asked me to go and get the class teacher while I was standing at the door. [027D]

I have been given the more challenging class. I have been overlooked several times for less experienced teachers who have been given mentoring, support, and guidance. [027C]

One partner teacher would hardly speak to me. She was overheard saying things [negative things about me]. As the lead teacher, she would not allow me to plan any of the lessons and would then complain again that she was doing all the work. She would not accept any suggestions that I have made – they would be shut down. [022D]

As a Black teacher I feel that there is a higher expectation of me, maybe because a lot of eyes are on us. Any disagreements [with other teachers or even parents] and I am labelled aggressive or loud. A parent was unable to say my name/class but able to describe me as the 'black one' (I was their child's teacher for a few months). [025B] Racism was not direct but indirect. [065D]

### **Barriers to promotion for Black teachers**

I am a class teacher, yes, I don't think anything has stopped me from being a teacher. However, in terms of progression it's a bit slow. A visitor saw me and assumed I was a Teaching Assistant just by seeing my face [025B]

My school teaching experience is good now, but, before there was always the thought that Black teachers were over-looked for promotion [015C].

Not going to say, no, I have been overlooked on several occasions for promotion. [025D].

I am a class teacher and SENDCO for a primary school. In this role, I have been able to progress without discrimination. In previous roles, outside of teaching, I felt my colour held me back. [034A]

I feel I've had to adjust my aspirations [027A]

I have been overlooked several times and less experienced teachers have been giving mentoring, support, and guidance [079A]

Opportunities have been provided by my headteacher however, there was one particular member of the SLT who was not very supportive until she was directed to do so [027D].

I am an Assistant Headteacher. I have been given coaching and sent on training courses. However, I have had to do a lot of hard work to be considered 'ready' for such development [019B].

### **Contextual analysis**

The common issues resulting from the respondent groups reporting on their personal and then their professional experiences were grouped [through weight of reported evidence] under the headings of *teacher expectations; racial abuse; lack of support and barriers to promotion.*

Nothing is changing. The authors' current research survey, undertaken in 2023, could have been processed in the year 2000 and [probably] would have still yielded the same concerning results as those found 20 or 25 years later. If anything, the current survey evidences a worsening in teachers' experiences of covert and overt racism. To substantiate that statement, Carrington et al (2000) study reported from a survey sample of 149 Newly Qualified Teachers that around a quarter 26% had encountered incidents of racism in their placement schools" (p.91). Similarly, Stuart et al (2003) research in which 28 Black student teachers and three Deputy Heads were interviewed, revealed "a mixed picture of racism, xenophobia and ignorance in the schools" (p.5). Research by Hargreaves (2011) in which the voices of 65 Black and Asian teachers reported on "...their treatment within the profession, and in particular, the barriers they have faced in relation to promotion to senior leadership roles suggests a high degree of institutional racism within the teaching profession..." (p.39). In 2023 we find the same issue of institutional racism being reported by Demie & See's (2023) study: *Ethnic disproportionality in the school teaching workforce in England*, although this work focuses on a growing mismatch between the ethnic diversity of the pupil population and that of teachers in their schools, these authors recognize the connected relationship between knowledge, power, and the creators of that knowledge within pedagogical settings.

The results from our current survey highlight the very worrying issue of status as it relates to Black professional identity. Several teachers spoke about being misidentified as the classroom helper or *parents ignoring me and talking to my white TA. Parents ignoring me and talking to another adult that was white; Parents assuming that I am the Teaching Assistant and talking to the white Teaching Assistant instead of me.* These statements relate directly to the dominance of 'Whiteness' and "how white teachers maintain their ownership of teaching by being overwhelmingly overrepresented in the workforce and by implication, owning curricular, official knowledge, values, attitudes, culture, norms and so on and so on" (Boyle & Charles, 2016, p.883). A lack of promotion and Senior leadership roles continue to blight the experiences of Black teachers:

*Although, I have climbed to the level of Assistant Headteacher and have been given coaching and sent on training courses, I have had to do a lot of hard work to be considered 'ready' for such development.*

*I have been overlooked several times for less experienced teachers who have been given mentoring, support, and guidance.* Mboyo (2019) cites "racism as one of the reasons for <sup>1</sup>BME underrepresentation in positions of school leadership in England. Although self-confidence, resilience, perseverance and drawing on the support of family and friends" (p.110 & p.112) continue as strategies to counter the effects of racism. Similar findings from USA in the study by Bailes & Guthery (2020) state: "We find that race and gender are associated with the probability of promotion to school leadership...Black principals are least likely to be promoted and wait longer for promotion when compared to white assistant principals" (p.1).

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<sup>1</sup> The current authors view the labels BME and BAME as highly problematic.

The lack of parity in a segregated teaching workforce has inevitably created a culture which, in 2023, according to recent UK poll: *‘Half of Britons cannot name a Black British historical figure, Majority of British people found to have shockingly little knowledge about Black British history* (The Guardian, 26<sup>th</sup> October 2023). Instead of a concerted push and a concentration on reframing the curriculum with evidenced primary research on Britain’s founding Black populations, the argument and discussion usually centers on quotas and increasing the number of Black teachers. Of course, equality and representation remain at the heart of reforming the system, but one must avoid a discourse on the simplistic notion of Blacks being role-models for Black children, as West (1999) reminds us that this is a familiar homogenizing impulse that assumes that all Black people are alike...such tendencies result in obliterating differences (class, region, accent, culture and so on) between Black people” (p.36). Indeed, several of the teachers reported in our study a culture of low expectations and the effects and absence of an empowering curriculum: *In school growing up, I would say that teacher expectations [for Black children/students] were generally not as high as they could have been. I remember feeling like not much was expected of me, and I wasn’t ‘stretched’. If your behaviour was considered hard to manage, you were moved to a group below your ability.* If the dominant teaching workforce are socialized and inculcated within a schooling system in which the current content of the curriculum teaches slavery as its starting point for Black history; then it should follow that low expectations coupled with an absence of true Black history will form the basis of pedagogical interaction.

Why is it, then, that we consistently find that a predicable suggested outcome or recommendation to surveys or research within this domain is to essentially ‘train white teachers on how to become less racist in educational settings?’ Decade after decade the issue of racism and its damaging effects on the psyche of Black children, who, when they grow up to become potential Black teachers or leaders, are usually given the responsibility to initiate ‘unconscious bias’ programmes within their school or subject departments without *ever changing* their pedagogical content. Why are senior leaders and government officials ignoring and “failing to fully incorporate the new, diverse histories produced by UK and international researchers?” (Royal Historical Society, 2018, p.7). Gus John (2006) observes: “Tinkering with the system, amendments to the procedures and peripheral provision (through mentoring, counselling etc, no matter how well intended) will not change things for Black pupils generally” (p.238).

Psychologist and historian Amos Wilson (1983/2015) provides a solution: “We cannot wait 20, or 30 years to learn basic lessons - the system is not working for Black children. Words and language are the culmination of a people, so the accumulation of experience and knowledge of Black people should be improved as each generation passes through the education system. That is one of the functions of culture - to solve its problems and this is how people evolve through the workings of its culture. Why must generations of Black children be sacrificed to the system in which they are expelled, suspended, and receive few qualifications?” (lecture presentation).

### **Conclusion**

The common issues resulting from the respondent groups reportage on their personal and then their professional experiences were grouped [through weight of reported evidence] under the headings of *teacher expectations; racial abuse; lack of support and barriers to promotion*. These issues are not new nor sadly, were they unexpected, as the cited research literature from previous [and current] years evidenced. How many more

research exercises and surveys and analyses are required to point to the scale of the malaise and the urgent need for action at pedagogical policy level for both the Black schooling experience and the access, development, and promotional journeys of Black teachers already in and/or thinking about joining the profession?

In summary then, from a somewhat disappointing volume return of responses [despite reminders], Newham's reported profile [from this self-selected sample of respondent teachers] is set at two extremes – a minority expressing positive responses about lack of racism in the teaching experience and conversely a majority of strong positive statements about racist experiences and the effect of those experiences upon those teachers' daily working life and their progression through the teaching hierarchy in their schools.

The researchers also reflect, with concern, that Newham is reported to have the most ethnically diverse teaching population in the 33 London Authorities (Demie. F & Hau. A. 2022), yet the profile that has emerged throughout our research into the life and professional journeys of the Black teachers in Newham does not bode well for similar investigations and comparative studies across the remaining London Authorities.

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### **Ամփոփում**

Այս հոդվածը շարունակում է հեղինակների նախորդ հետազոտությունների ուղղությունը, որոնք վերաբերում են սևամորթ մասնագետների՝ Մեծ Բրիտանիայի կրթության համակարգում նշանակալի դեր ստանձնելու հնարավորությունների սահմանափակմանը և դրանից բխող հիասթափությանը: Ուսումնասիրելով իրավիճակը Լիվերպոլում [Boyle & Charles, 2011, 2016]՝ մենք որոշեցինք դիտարկել նաև մայրաքաղաքը և ընտրեցինք Լոնդոնի վարչական շրջաններից մեկը՝ որպես այլընտրանքային վայր:

Մենք կանգ առանք Նյուհեմի վրա, քանի որ առկա տվյալների համաձայն՝ այս վարչական շրջանն ունի Լոնդոնի 33 վարչական շրջանների մեջ ամենաբազմազան էթնիկական կազմով ուսուցչական անձնակազմը [Demie & Hau, 2022]:

Հետազոտության նպատակը Նյուհեմի ներկայիս սևամորթ ուսուցիչների ինքնագնահատվող փորձի վերլուծությունն էր նրանց անձնական ապրումների տեսանկյունից՝ որպես սևամորթ սովորողների՝ Մեծ Բրիտանիայի կրթության համակարգում, ապա՝ որպես սևամորթ ուսուցիչների՝ նույն համակարգում աշխատելու ընթացքում:

Հոդվածի նպատակն է ուսումնասիրել սևամորթ ուսուցիչների ինքնադրսևորումը Մեծ Բրիտանիայի կրթական համակարգում՝ կենտրոնանալով Լոնդոնի Նյուհեմ թաղամասում սևամորթ ուսուցիչների փորձի վրա: Ուսումնասիրության նպատակն է վեր-



լուծել Մեծ Բրիտանիայի դպրոցական կրթության համակարգում որպես ուսանող իրենց ուղին և բրիտանական դպրոցներում որպես ուսուցիչ աշխատելու փորձը՝ հատուկ ուշադրություն դարձնելով կրթական միջավայրում սևամորթների մարզինալացմանն ու անօրինականությանն առնչվող խնդիրներին:

*Բանալի բառեր՝ սևամորթ մանկավարժներ, կրթության համակարգ, էթնիկ բազմազանություն, անհավասարություն, խտրականություն, սոցիալական արդարություն, Մեծ Բրիտանիա, Լիվերպուլ, Լոնդոն, Նյուհեմ:*

## ПРОЦЕСС РЕГУЛИРОВАНИЯ РОЛИ ЧЕРНОКОЖИХ ПЕДАГОГОВ В СИСТЕМЕ ОБЩЕГО ОБРАЗОВАНИЯ АНГЛИИ

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### Аннотация

Эта статья продолжает направление предыдущих исследований, посвященных изучению ограничения возможностей чернокожих специалистов играть значительную роль в системе образования Великобритании и вызванному этим разочарованию. Изучив ситуацию в Ливерпуле [Boyle & Charles, 2011, 2016], мы решили рассмотреть подобную ситуацию также и в столице и в качестве альтернативы выбрали для этого один из административных районов Лондона.

Из 33 административных округов Лондона мы остановились на Ньюхэме, поскольку, согласно имеющимся данным, именно в этом административном округе наблюдается наибольшее этническое разнообразие среди педагогического состава [Demie & Nau, 2022].

Цель исследования заключается в изучении опыта работы современных чернокожих учителей Ньюхэма, за основу взяты их личные переживания в качестве чернокожих учащихся в системе школьного образования Великобритании, а затем в качестве чернокожих преподавателей, работающих в этой системе.

Цель статьи – изучить опыт чернокожих учителей, работающих в системе образования Великобритании, с упором на опыт чернокожих учителей в лондонском районе Ньюхэм. Цель исследования – проанализировать их жизненный путь в качестве учащихся в системе школьного образования Великобритании и их опыт работы учителями в британских школах, уделив особое внимание проблемам, связанным с маргинализацией и бесправием чернокожих людей в образовательной среде.

**Ключевые слова:** *чернокожие педагоги, система образования, этническое разнообразие, неравенство, дискриминация, социальная справедливость, Великобритания, Ливерпуль, Лондон, Ньюхэм.*

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