

**History Hurts:
(Kay Traille 16 March 2007)**

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When Professor Mirza invited me to take part in this debate to mark the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, She could not have known that my primary school years were spent at Wilberforce school in west London. It therefore seems fitting that a pupil of Wilberforce should comment on the experiences of history students and mothers of African-Caribbean origins. Tonight I will focus on the 'peculiar institution' and its often painful legacy.

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I have spent a number of years manoeuvring through the dilemmas of what students said they felt about their history lessons. I have also explored accounts of their personal experiences of school history and what they and their mothers wanted formal history education to provide.

Methodology

- 124 students of African-Caribbean and non-African-Caribbean descent aged 13 to 17 surveyed by postal questionnaire.
- In depth interviews took place of 6 students of African-Caribbean descent and 6 of non African- Caribbean origin between the ages of 12 and 17 and their mothers.

Did their ideas and experiences match up to their hopes and expectations?

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In 1993 Shaniqua, (16) commented :

I think every black child should know their history. At my old school they made me feel bad about being black when we did the slave trade.

They talked about all the diseases that the slaves had. You should be proud about your history. They made me feel ashamed.

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In 2001 Fred (13) said about the previous comment:

Well they (black children) really need to read more, to read more books about their history. 'Cos if really if that is all they saw? If all the information they just get from school, that's not really what she is looking for. It will just make you feel bad. If you can, read some different books to find out about your ancestors, your history, what your people did. And whatever, whatever, whatever. And um, you can, she will probably finally be able to appreciate the fact that she had read those books because she would have found out other stuff.

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Vivian 2001 (mother of Fred) talking about her time learning history said:

I mean I did history at school, I've got 'A' level history and all of that, but I never really enjoyed history in my younger years, I couldn't relate to any of it. You know the queens and the kings, and I didn't know why I couldn't relate to it. But you know in hindsight, it's because I couldn't identify with the people.... When I went on to do 'A' level history 'O' level history and all that, I began to realise that the history of black people was interwoven in the history of England, in the history of Europe, and then I began to have an interest. So um, I try to um tell my children whenever I have the opportunity...when things are going on, when you are looking at history, that it is connected to your own history. I don't actually say it like that I just keep pointing it out.

The ideas of students and mothers of A/C origins focused on issues of navigation, identity, social legitimacy, social knowledge, and ownership. They valued history for a number of reasons.

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What students and mothers of African-Caribbean descent thought history was for

- History was for making people feel proud of their ancestors,
- It gave people a sense of knowing where they came from.
- It bolstered self-esteem and helped academic performance.
- History was a compass used for navigating the self and society.
- It taught lessons of respect, of 'never again' and of gaining a feeling of self-respect from ancestors.
- It helped people fit in.
- History was also a subject that incorporated a 'feel good factor'.
- It had the power to grant legitimacy or illegitimacy, pedigree or lack of pedigree.
- History was a key factor in accounting for the way people perceived other people
- History offered status and glory or stereotyping and ignominy.

These were the key ideas that they had about history.

However, sometimes the hopes and aspirations they had for the discipline were dashed by their experiences when sensitive issues were being taught.

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Teaching sensitive issues

Students of Caribbean heritage thought that history was a subject that often dealt with sensitive issues and helped people respect each other.

Jodi (15) of African-Caribbean origins:

But I think History does help people to respect that [different nationalities] because they learn what has happened ... It doesn't really matter what people think necessarily because you know where you're from, and that's what matters. As long as you know where you are from, and you are proud of your culture, and you can respect other people's culture, at the end of the day then you're the better person for that.

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Ulrika, 2001 Mother of Jodi talking of an experience her daughter had said:

I mean, like once they were doing about slavery. And she spoke a lot about that because she was really angry in that they had to do a role-play, I think there is about three black kids in the whole school. They had to do a role-play her group obviously picked Jodi as the slave. They wanted her to speak in total gibberish, which she refused to do. And that seemed to move out to the corridor, and within, you know they get like bad conduct marks. I can't remember the name of those.

Interviewer: Um

Ulrika: And Jodi tends to get one about every twelve weeks or something. She got three in a week. You know and it ended up with me phoning her tutor, phoning the Head of Year and complaining bitterly about their lack of sensitivity.

Interviewer: What did they say?

Ulrika: Well the Head of Year was 'Oh I've worked in Nigeria, I understand it all'. Just put up with it basically.

In my study students thought teachers should not be afraid of tackling emotive issues in their history classrooms, as they wanted to be made aware of such factors within history. Ideas expressed indicate that some students of African-Caribbean descent interpreted negative attitudes of peers and teachers about black people in history as personal attacks on their identity. They felt hurt, anger, and

bewilderment. These feelings of temporary exclusion could impact adversely on their learning experience. However, the key issue for these students and their mothers was that when teaching emotive subjects they thought teachers should do so sensitively. The evidence indicates that students and mothers of African-Caribbean descent assumed that teachers should realise the people that they were teaching were **'still children'**. This is a central observation. Learning environments should be safe enough, and curricula wide enough, for views and understandings to be aired and challenged, thereby perhaps making the learning experience more satisfying for all those involved.

Negative portrayals of people of colour are ingrained in society. Black people are more often than not seen as being associated with societal problems (Grosvenor, 1997; 2000)ⁱ. Such negative misconceptions and preconceptions need at least to be challenged within the history curriculum and teaching. We cannot afford to ignore the way we make our students feel. When teaching at times there is a need to tread softly. This is not political correctness— it is common sense.

Turning to the issue of teacher attitudes and sins of ignorance;

Teacher Attitudes and Sins of Ignorance

- Educators need to become more conscious of affective concerns and develop a more culturally relevant stance with regard to teaching history to students of African-Caribbean descent.
- There must be a more explicit process that encourages teachers to examine and face their own prejudices, attitudes and beliefs towards others in society. Data in my study suggests that some teachers are creating contexts of misunderstanding, hopefully not because they set out to alienate.

The discipline of history often uses language infused with emotion.

'Imperialism', 'slavery', 'civilised' 'Palestine' , 'Israel', are words that trip

lightly off the tongue and can immediately raise the hackles of some, while enthusing others.

Significant Silences

Sometimes it is not the spoken but the unspoken word that damages. The silence of teachers speaks volumes. Non-African-Caribbean students did not mention such experiences, but students of African-Caribbean descent certainly did. In the eyes of minority groups silence from teachers may imply a measure of complicity to injustice and may leave students feeling vulnerable and open to the attacks of others.

Classroom Practice and Academic Performance

Students are unlikely to relate well to a lesson if they feel excluded or belittled by the topic or how a topic is being taught. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that academic performance will probably be negatively affected, since the way students are made to feel in the classroom can impact their behaviour. Students of African-Caribbean descent wrote about history lessons that made them feel 'like I was going to have a nose bleed' and be 'brain dead'. Over 80 per cent of the students of African-Caribbean descent in the questionnaire sample said they did not feel involved during their history lessons. Eighty four per cent of the male students in the questionnaire sample claimed that they were 'bored' and in the interview sample they complained of feeling belittled and excluded.

Misconceptions Reinforced by Curriculum Content

A question often asked is 'so why don't we see Chinese children or other ethnic groups having the same problems at school as African-Caribbean students?' Let me suggest that one of the main differences is an unspoken assumption of a discredited nineteenth century idea of a hierarchy of

racism/nationalities, which in its raw form is possibly prevalent in the everyday thinking of some children. Comments purportedly made by non-African-Caribbean students such as 'you wouldn't see white people doing that' and 'you've got to be the slave', suggest that ideas of racial superiority are present in some classrooms. If the history curriculum is seen to reinforce these ideas then perhaps some black students are likely to feel that their identities are under attack in the classroom.

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History National Curriculum Content

My study suggests that the idea of a 'one size fits all' History National Curriculum needs to be carefully rethought. It is not being advocated that we revert back to a hotch-potch system with seemingly little rhyme or reason for content choice. However, the History National Curriculum of England should include content material that is appropriate for all ethnic backgrounds. My findings suggest that for a significant number of students of African-Caribbean descent the History National Curriculum in its present guise is an uncomfortable fit. If the negative experiences of students in this study are representative, a serious defect in what is taught and the way history is treated in some classrooms is apparent.

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At present history lesson content supposedly about African-Caribbean people typically focuses on *Black People of the Americas*, and almost by default black British students with African-Caribbean backgrounds as well as non-African-Caribbean groups are expected to view it as African-Caribbean history. Furthermore, the topic's focus is on the issue of slavery and almost inevitably tends to centre on the victimisation of black people and their redemption by others. Upset arising from this topic was a point that students of African-Caribbean descent in both the questionnaire (68%) and the interview sample emphasised. In contrast non-African-Caribbean students and their parents made no such comments about particular topics that caused disquiet or distress. I am in no way suggesting that the topic of slavery should

be erased from the history curriculum. However, students of African-Caribbean descent had negative experiences when this topic was taught.

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Identity, Ownership and Curriculum Content

Any revision of the History Curriculum for England with regard to students of African-Caribbean origins should not be exclusively Afro-centric in nature. Overall, mothers and students of African-Caribbean ancestry did not want an Afro-centric curriculum. What they wanted was a history curriculum that included black people as part of the mainstream narrative, not a marginalised sub-section.

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Implications for Policy Makers

In 2001, Nadine, (14), talking about slavery, made the comment:

(Black students) did not understand why it was alright to put black people through this. And even though they say slavery has been abolished and everything, it's still going on today. Like black people aren't treated as equally and still have to suffer racism and stuff like that.

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Perhaps I am now going to tread on a few metaphorical toes but, I would like to suggest that the topic of slavery should be taught to students as a major phenomenon of human history that has been a feature of all major civilisations from the ancient world until the present day. It should not be segregated as a phenomenon of the New World.

As we mark the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, it has been a huge achievement for people to think that slavery is not normal and for this we must acknowledge the role of Christianity. The Christian notion that

we should 'do unto others as we would ourselves' was key for individuals and societies coming to the belief that slavery was wrong.

CONCLUSION

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We could choose to ignore emotive and challenging subjects in history lessons, but it is probably to the detriment of history classrooms and ultimately society if all students are not given the tools for exploring and challenging their preconceptions by learning how to accommodate a broad awareness of the past. If students (whether of African-Caribbean descent or not), fail to see the big picture and to properly grasp how history works, then there is a danger that they will form collective memory ghettos with highly distorted 'feel good factors' or become cultural amnesiacs with little sense of direction to the detriment of themselves and society.

If we only pay lip service to diversity in the history curriculum, if we alienate through ignorance or disenfranchise through our teaching, if we ignore and remain silent through indifference or fear of causing disharmony, then it should not surprise us when the history have-nots take what they have not been given and create historical narratives that clash with the ideals of democratic societies.

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Young people hold the future in their hands and the way they think and feel about history is relevant to the present and probably significant in shaping futures. We can, if we are daring enough, teach history in ways that will give them tools to view the past, the present and future, through a variety of windows that will empower them (Barton and Levstik, 2004)ⁱⁱ. Ultimately democratic societies can only benefit from such a process.

ⁱ Grosvenor, I. (2000). History for the nation: Multiculturalism and the teaching of history. In J. Arthur., & R. Phillips (Eds.). *Issues in history teaching* (pp. 148-158). London: RoutledgeFalmer.

ⁱⁱ Barton, K. C., & Levstik, L.S. (2004). *Teaching history for the common good*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. Inc.