

## Education, Equality, diversity and inclusion, Race, ethnicity and culture

### Reclaiming narratives

Educators have a key role to play in highlighting Black people's achievements, past and present, year-round, argues Dr Denise Miller, a member of the BPS's Division of Educational and Child Psychology.

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*During Black History Month, which this year takes theme of 'Reclaiming narratives', Dr Denise Miller explores the power of stories and what schools and the higher education sector can do to help reframe history, so that it accurately reflects Black people's contributions as 'innovators, leaders and change makers'.*

Recently I found myself in an all-too familiar situation. During a meeting, as the discussion unfolded, I became acutely aware of the subtle but pervasive ways in which those present perpetuated negative stereotypical narratives about people with lived experiences like my own. Yet, in that moment, rather than expending my emotional and intellectual energy to challenge these reductive perceptions directly, I found myself succumbing to what Steele and Aronson (1995) describe as '[stereotype threat](#)'.

That is, rather than risk being perceived as an 'angry' or 'aggressive' Black woman, I opted to share a story about my personal experience, in the hope that it might provide others with a pertinent understanding of my perspective. What followed, however, was both disheartening and emblematic of a larger issue. My story, while judged to be 'very good' by 'others', was soon appropriated and repackaged. Put differently, my lived experience was reframed to fit a narrative more palatable to those in the room. Although this seemingly minor '[microinvalidation](#)' may have appeared inconsequential to 'others', it highlighted a much more troubling systemic issue. Who gets to tell their stories? And importantly, whose voices are privileged or silenced in the process?

### The power of storytelling

Storytelling is a universal and fundamental means of communication, identity formation, and knowledge transfer. Across cultures and throughout history, storytelling has played a significant role in shaping societal values, preserving history, and envisioning possible futures. In educational settings, from early years to higher education, stories are essential to the learning process. Through textbooks, lessons, and historical accounts, students are exposed to narratives that influence their understanding of the world and themselves.

However, within Western educational contexts, the contributions of Black people have been systematically marginalised, misrepresented, or erased. This marginalisation is particularly evident when examining the narratives and frameworks that dominate academic fields, such as psychology and education. For example, the development of

intelligence tests is widely associated with White men, such as Alfred Binet, Lewis Terman, David Wechsler, and Charles Spearman. Evidently, their work has significantly impacted the field of intelligence testing.

However, less recognised is the resistance from Black scholars who challenged the biases inherent in these tests. For instance, [Dr Robert Williams](#) exposed the cultural bias in traditional IQ tests and developed the Black Intelligence Test of Cultural Homogeneity; Dr Asa Hilliard criticised the misuse of intelligence tests on Black children and advocated for [African-centred education](#); Dr Mamie and Dr Kenneth Clark, famous for developing 'The Doll Test', argued against the [use of biased tests](#) in education during the Brown v. Board of Education case, and Dr Horace Mann Bond demonstrated how [environmental factors, not innate ability, explained IQ differences](#).

Although these scholars, like all academics, have encountered critiques, their contributions continue to influence contemporary educational and psychological practices. Yet, their work remains largely absent from mainstream educational curricula and underused in professional training programmes.

The consequences of missing narratives

Arguably, the educational landscape's consistent emphasis on Eurocentric perspectives fosters an incomplete and distorted worldview. Black people in history are invariably pigeonholed into narratives of victimhood, oppression, and enslavement, while their contributions as innovators, leaders, and changemakers are often ignored.

This selective framing distorts history and reinforces a sense of cultural superiority associated with Whiteness. The ramifications are significant, particularly for Black children and young people. When Black history is silenced or distorted, the educational system perpetuates a cycle of 'miseducation' (Akbar, 1984), where generations of children and young people are denied a broad, balanced, and accurate understanding of history and their place within it.

Research indicates that this miseducation subtly conveys the message that Black contributions to society are less valuable than those of White people. These biases can create a self-perpetuating cycle, that influences how children and young people view themselves and how they are perceived and treated by their peers and teachers. This raises important questions about whether longstanding disparities, particularly those affecting Black students, are associated with systemic inequalities embedded within educational curricula that fail to reflect the full range of possibilities and contributions available to them. Notably, in the UK, Black students are disproportionately adultified, experience higher exclusion rates, and are less likely to achieve good degree classifications compared to their White peers.

## Reclaiming narratives: The role of educators

Reflecting on my own experience of having my story misappropriated, I am reminded of the importance of reclaiming and reframing narratives, particularly within educational settings. Nurseries, schools, colleges, and universities occupy prominent roles in influencing our understanding of history, identity, and the world around us.

To reclaim Black narratives effectively, educational institutions must fully integrate the achievements of Black people across all fields (including activists, psychologists, educators, scientists, artists, philosophers, and political leaders) into their core curricula. Black people's contributions must not be viewed or presented as anomalies or exceptions. Rather, they should be recognised as essential elements of both historical and contemporary society.

Furthermore, this reclamation of Black narratives must extend beyond the confines of a single month, such as Black History Month. While it is important to appreciate the significance of this observance, relegating Black history to a few weeks out of the year reinforces a marginalisation that undermines its significance. Moreover, the history, achievements, and contributions of Black people must be presented as part of a living history that continuously shapes our present and future. Educators must emphasise the legacies of historical figures, and the ongoing relevance and impact of contemporary Black voices in politics, culture, science, and beyond.

Ultimately, the reclamation of Black narratives involves a commitment to telling all stories with the depth, critique, and reverence they deserve.

### About the author

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