

Final word

Inclusion in practice, not merely symbolic



Fact file

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PHOTO by The Black Curriculum

Members of youth organising charity the Advocacy Academy, with Millie Mensah (third from left), author of *Migration*, published by The Black Curriculum. It has also published books called *Legacies* and *Places*

THE independent curriculum and assessment review – led by Professor Becky Francis – is long overdue.

There are many inherent complexities with the national curriculum, which was introduced in 2014: age-appropriate teaching and assessments, immense target-driven pressures on schools and pupils, and too many exams, to name a few.

Another urgent area that needs addressing is its Eurocentrism. A report by social enterprise group The Black Curriculum (theblackcurriculum.com) in 2021 found that Black British history is systematically omitted in favour of a dominant white, Eurocentric curriculum, which fails to reflect our multi-ethnic and broadly diverse society.

The lack of global or alternative histories within our curriculum disempowers many pupils, some of whom lack a sense of identity and belonging. The Black Curriculum group asks an important question: should Black history be taught all year around and be embedded within the curriculum? This is a key question for Prof Francis' review panel to consider.

There is a whole page devoted to the centrality of inclusion in the national curriculum for both primary and secondary education, which states that teachers should take account of the diverse backgrounds of

pupils across the protected characteristics. This includes race, disability, religion, sexual orientation, pupils with special educational needs, and those whose first language is not English.

More than Vikings and Victorians

However, there is a body of research that suggests the idea of inclusion, diversity and equity operates, for pupils, as rhetorical and symbolic as opposed to genuine and actual. This is especially so for those who are of Black and ethnic minority backgrounds.

For example, a brief reading of the curriculum in subjects such as art, English and history illustrates the vast space given to examples of themes and issues that can be taught and are British and European in context.

History includes the Viking invasions, the battle of 1066, Victorian England and so on. Then a few nominal references (towards the end) to the teaching of ancient Benin or Egypt, the Shang and Qing dynasties etc. For literature, the curriculum includes Shakespeare, Romantic poetry and contemporary English literature, plus some nods to the teaching of 'world literature'.

So how should the current review address the Eurocentric nature of the curriculum? Often, some simple yet effective changes to the wording in the guidance for teachers can empower educators to teach a more diverse

and global curriculum that is reflective of their students.

Take, for example, the subject guidance for primary art. One key directive is to 'know about great artists, craft makers and designers, and understand the historical and cultural development of their art forms'. Adding the words 'from across the globe' after 'designers' advances a more inclusive message. This would allow teachers to be flexible and creative, going beyond a focus on European artists such as Picasso and Da Vinci.

More broadly, how do we make inclusivity a central and tangible part of how we teach and learn? One way is to develop a 'culturally responsive pedagogy' in our approach to reforming the curriculum to make it more relevant to our students' lives.

The term 'culturally responsive pedagogy' is a teaching philosophy, developed by Ladson-Billings (1995), that taps into various kinds of knowledge and lived experiences of pupils as a means of making classrooms and curricula more inclusive. It is premised on the idea that valuing culture is central to learning.

Educators should be taking the time to listen to, value and understand the lived experiences of their pupils. This is especially the case for many Black pupils who come from disadvantaged, low socio-economic backgrounds and whose identities and voices are often silenced, misrepresented or ignored.