

# a short history of ‘race’ in British schools: a 75-year timeline

Heidi Safia Mirza

This graphic timeline reveals the story of Race in British schools as it unfolds from the 1950 post war period of post-colonial migration and settlement to the present-day aftermath of the 2020s Post-Covid Pandemic. Spanning 75 years, this unique mapping charts the changing social and political context of Race-relations which shaped the British educational response to Black and Brown children in hitherto White classrooms. Decade by decade from the 1950s onwards, the analysis examines how and why specific Race and Ethnic policy discourses evolved such as Multiculturalism in 1980s, Institutional Racism in 2000s and Decolonisation in 2015. It situates the deep national racial and religious fears that fueled controversial policies such as the bussing of Caribbean pupils and PREVENT aimed at the surveillance of Muslim communities’ post 9/11. Furthermore, it situates the historical roots of established approaches such as EDI (Equality Diversity and Inclusion) which we take for granted today. The article concludes by coming full circle exposing the entrenched intersectional Race and class inequalities which the Covid19 Pandemic has now laid bare in British schools.

Keywords: decolonisation, EDI policies, institutional racism, multicultural education, race and ethnic inequalities

## Introduction

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., leader of the Civil Rights Movement once said, “The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice” (King, 1968). His words of hope reassure us that even though racial justice may seem slow in coming, one day it will surely come. For Dr. King and the African American women that led the drive for literacy and voter registration in the USA, education was a key site of struggle in the battle for Black Civil Rights. However, for social and racial justice to prevail in our schools, educational professionals working on the coal face of the classroom need clarity and an informed understanding of what they are fighting for and why it is important to do so (Mirza & Meetoo, 2012). Thus, the aim of this short history of Race in British schools is to present an overview of the shifting State responses to its Black and Brown children, illuminating the trajectory of the arc of social and racial justice as it appears and disappears in the educational narrative of 21<sup>st</sup> Century multicultural Britain.



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## 1950-1960: Migration

The presence of Black and Brown children in schools was a new and strange sight in post-war Britain. For 500 years Imperial Britain had ruled ‘her subjects’ *over there* in faraway colonies, but after the devastation of 2<sup>nd</sup> World War post-colonial New Commonwealth Citizens were needed *over here* to rebuild the ‘Motherland’. The unfolding history of people from the West Indies (Caribbean), India, Africa, Pakistan, and Bangladesh tell a tale of racism, resistance, and an uneasy overcoming (Mirza, 2006).

### 1960-1970: Assimilation

The first wave of Black and Indo-Caribbean Windrush migrants met overt hostile racism with signs to “go home” and political prophecies of the Conservative Enoch Powell who warned of “rivers of blood flowing in the streets” (Tomlinson, 2019, p. 67). The educational response to the ‘dark stranger’ was to assimilate Black and Brown children into British culture by ‘flattening’ out their difference. They were bussed out of areas to cool out and placate White fears. However, the colonial legacy of White superiority and the *idea* of inferior Races meant that Black and Brown children were seen as having lower IQs and many were contained in Educationally Subnormal Schools (SEN) or ‘Sin Bins’- a pattern still in play today with high rates of school exclusions, regulatory regimes in Academies and PRU’s (Pupil Referral Units).

### 1970-1980: Multiculturalism

Labour’s Roy Jenkins famously advocated multicultural integration through “equal opportunity and cultural diversity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance” (Tomlinson, 2019, p. 74). Now Black and Brown communities were able to openly express their difference by wearing a turban or saying their prayers. Schools responded in superficial but well-meaning ways with ‘happy clappy’ celebrations of ‘saris, somas and steelpans.’ However, Black and Asian parents set up Supplementary and faith-based schools outside the State system which was excluding and failing their children.

### 1980-1990: Underachievement

In the Thatcher years, underachievement which was rife among racialised ethnic groups was explained through problematic theories of cultural deficit, negative self-esteem, and the self-fulfilling prophecy of low teacher expectations. In the aftermath of the Brixton Riots, the Swann Report identified racial discrimination as the cause of ‘underachievement’. Antiracism was mooted as the solution by small pockets of White, Black, and Asian teacher activists such as the ILEA (Inner London Education Authority), who campaigned for Black Studies and positive images in textbooks, expressing an early incarnation of the current call for ‘Decolonisation’.

### 1990-2000: Diversity and Difference

The euphoric New Labour years celebrated difference and embraced ‘can do’ attitudes where all can rise to the top regardless of Race, gender, and class origins. While many ethnic groups identified with the ideal of meritocracy and benefited from policies of ‘Raising Standards for all’, it also cemented existing inequalities though ‘markets and choice’ as more privileged middle classes were able to access better schools in an increasingly fragmented and privatized educational system. Diversity policies made little impact, becoming entangled in institutional bureaucracy with ‘tick-box’ antiracist proclamations and window-dressing rather than action.

## 2000-2005: Institutional Racism

The racist murder of Black teenager Stephen Lawrence and the Met Police coverup heralded a new era of antiracist rigour with the McPherson Report introducing the concept of institutional racism in public (not private) organisations. The focus was now on structural racism and exposing its everyday reproduction through learnt behaviour or unwitting racism, now reframed as unconscious bias. Legal remedies included Positive Duties to promote good Race-relations through ethnic monitoring and reporting of racist incidents. However, we have witnessed little meaningful institutional cultural change as mechanisms hinged on ‘individual redress’ and personal complaint rather than diverse leadership, accountability and scrutiny.

## 2005-2010: Community Cohesion

In the wake of the 9/11 and British 7/7 terrorist attacks Islamophobia became widespread, and politicians pronounced multiculturalism as ‘dead’. Community Cohesion evolved in response to faith-based concerns with Muslim communities living “parallel lives” in poverty, in religiously segregated Northern towns. Securitization and safeguarding through controversial policies such as PREVENT shone a spotlight on Muslim communities, and schools were tasked with reporting pupils in danger of radicalisation and delivering British Values.

## 2010-2015: Post-Race

The election of Obama in USA and rising educational achievement of 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> generation British Black, Asian and Chinese young people signaled the ‘colourblind’ post-Race era. As the Sewell Report exemplifies, the belief is that Race is no longer a barrier to success and social mobility lies in individual endeavour and talent (Bourne, 2021). The 2010 Equalities Act reflected this move away from Race and towards intersectional, inclusive EDI (Education Diversity and Inclusion) with its emphasis on 9 Protected Characteristics including LGBTQI+ and gender equality. However, the shadow of Race and racism still haunts the educational landscape as the ethnic inequalities exposed during the Covid19 Pandemic so vividly showed.

## 2015-2020: Decolonisation

The 2015 and 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) uprisings revisited the 1950s postcolonial call for a global ‘thought revolution’. Spearheaded by students, this movement seeks to challenge the whitewashing of colonial history and scientific thought in the Eurocentric curriculum, economy, and architecture. However, the promise of this potentially world changing project has been sidelined by online ‘culture wars’ with all parties polarised and confused about ‘woke’ words, dismantling statues, and White allies. Schools and universities are left to find resources to meet new curricula demands while coping with the daily consequences of poverty, exclusion, safeguarding and mental health that the wider impact of racism, sexism, and discrimination still brings to their door.

## 2020-present: Post-Covid Inequalities

The double whammy of the Covid19 Pandemic coupled with the upheaval of Brexit sent shockwaves through British society. Like health, education has become the touchstone for measuring the uneven consequences of the unaddressed legacy of British racial inequality and

social class divisions. The Government's 'levelling up' agenda acknowledges the long-standing regional economic disparities in the neglected inner cities, abandoned rural areas, and the de-industrialised North. However, generations of 'left behind' Black, Asian and White working-class children locked into the geography of poverty and economic decline already carry deep scars on their learning identities and mental wellbeing (Alexander et al., 2015). This 21<sup>st</sup> century story of unequal access to good schools, teaching and resources is yet to unfold in the context of European and global unrest, mass migration and climate change, but the power of new technology and online learning may hold the key to racial justice and class mobility... but only if all can *equally* open that door.

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1. It is now generally accepted that there is no scientific or biological foundation for the 'Idea of Race' and the violent hierarchies of racial difference it propagated. After the horrors of the Holocaust UNESCO declared Race/'race' to be a social construct, hence the quotation marks or capital letters to denote its contested status. Race is therefore not about objective measurable physical and social characteristics, rather it describes enforced economic, social and cultural relationships of domination and subordination. Thus, when people use the term 'black' or Black to self-identify, it is understood not to constitute a real or fixed (essential) Race category but a politically empowering position for people who are visibly and politically positioned and as racialised 'others' in White supremacist societies (Bhavnani et al., 2005).