
REDIRECTING THE TRAJECTORY: THE IMPORTANCE OF BLACK SUPPLEMENTARY SCHOOLS IN BRITISH/BRITISH MUSLIM SOCIETY

BY SOUKEYNA OSEI-BONSU

Black and Black Muslim children's abilities and prospects are systemically undermined in British schools through the prominence of the 'school to prison pipeline' and other racialised disciplinary measures. I make the case for solely Black-focused education forums that provide a safe space for Black children to thrive and learn in an environment that does not criminalise or 'other' them. The article will then explore the similarities between British state schools and Islamic schools to highlight the ways in which Black Muslim children are also marginalised using the example of various lived experiences. Finally the article will explore the supplementary school Nana Asma'u Community school which was founded in 2018 for Black Muslim children in order to teach them an Afrocentric history and situate them in a genealogy they can be proud of.

A SYSTEM OF STRUCTURAL MISEDUCATION AND RACIALISED DISCIPLINARY MEASURES

In an education system where empire and whiteness is the norm, where nationalism has inevitably seeped into the curriculum, into classrooms, lesson plans, and history books, the Black child by default is systematically undermined. Schooling is an extension of the state whereby the ways in which Black students and children have their histories undermined reflects the undermining of the Black British citizen. A nation constructed through theft and dispossession cannot provide adequate education to its subaltern subjects. What I mean is that the very telling of the Black experience and Black history is a threat to British nationhood and the imagined fraternity (Anderson, 1991) and therefore before the Black child themselves know they are Black, their identities are securitised and suppressed in order to facilitate the telling of the benevolent white victor's history. This is in more concise terms a system of structural miseducation.

The dispossession of identity is a dispossession of the worst kind and it is silently happening across the classrooms of Britain. Beyond this are the deeply entrenched racist practices on the part of teaching staff such as the tactic of exclusion which Dianne Abbott MP has called a "silent catastrophe" (2002).

Cheryl Phoenix of The Black Child Agenda (n.d.) explores the reality of exclusionary practices in British schools and the inevitable consequence being the school to prison pipeline. She explores how exclusion from school and zero tolerance policies results in socialisation into crime:

Removing students from schools as a form of discipline takes them out of this formative environment and important process, and it removes them from the safety and structure that the school provides. Many students who express behavioural issues at school are acting out in response to stressful or dangerous conditions in their homes or neighbourhoods, and in many cases have underlying conditions which have never been diagnosed by the school, so removing them from school and returning them to a problematic or unsupervised home environment hurts rather than helps their development.

Similarly according to research conducted by the Black Child Agenda:

Though they comprise just 7 percent of the total enrolment of school students, Black students comprise 32 percent of in-school exclusions and 39 percent of out-of-school exclusions. Troublingly, this disparity begins as early as nursery. Nearly half of all nursery students excluded are Black, though they represent just 18 percent of total nursery enrolment. They represent 2 percent of out-of-school exclusions, which is 4 times greater than the percentage of total enrolled students that they comprise.

As a solution to such racialised tactics, schooling facilitated by Black staff can offer a means to reconnect troubled Black children to a genealogy of Black figures they will not study in school. Such a strategy is to provide a space for children to explore their Blackness safe from draconian disciplinary measures. The Black supplementary school therefore presents a solution in an unfair system to reintroduce Black children to their roots in the way their white counterparts are automatically afforded.

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN BRITISH STATE SCHOOLS AND ISLAMIC SCHOOLING: EXPLORING THE WAYS IN WHICH BLACK MUSLIM CHILDREN ARE UNDERMINED

According to Black Muslim Forum's (2020) research, the Islamic madrassah is not exempt from racialised tactics on the part of teachers and racist bullying from other students.

Many others outlined their experiences of attending madrassah's in the UK such as being called racist names, being told their skin is too dark and being made fun of as well as an instance where physical violence ensued (a Black Muslim madrassah student having a rock thrown at her eye by a racist bully at a predominantly Bangladeshi school).

Indeed in family dialogues among Black Muslims it is not uncommon to hear about Black Muslims being verbally abused by their teachers in Islamic schools and made to feel self-conscious because of the hue of their skin. Such stories are common amongst Black British Muslims. Of course, the ways in which Black Muslims students are undermined in the Muslim setting differs slightly to that of the secular schooling system. As evidenced by BMF's 2020 report, Arab supremacy and the problem of colourism imported from predominantly Arab and South Asian communities to the Muslim community in the UK poses unique forms of racial superiority that Black Muslim children are subjected to in conjunction with the racial violence suffered at the hands of teachers and other pupils in British state schools. This means the Black Muslim child suffers discrimination from within and outside of the Muslim community – from every angle of their educational development here in the UK.

WAYS FORWARD

Nana Asma'u community school is a Black Muslim/ Black supplementary school I founded in 2018 operating at Ghana Muslim Welfare House in North London. The school is named after

Princess Nana Asma'u - an educator, poet, military strategist, linguist and daughter of the leader of the Sokoto Caliphate. The school teaches pupils aged 3-11 covering African History, Afro-Muslim history and self-esteem in a creative environment through activities such as short story and poetry writing, drawing, colouring and general arts and crafts.

I believe that in order to undo structural miseducation such schools are necessary in order to sever the trajectory of reductionist history taught in state schools and redirect it to a true reflection of Black history and the Black experience. This school has successfully explored historical figures such as Mansa Musa, Malcolm X, Princess Nana Asma'u, Usman Dan Fodio, Askia of Songhay as well as the Sokoto Caliphate and the Kingdom of Mali. Initiatives such as this are necessary to restore the historical dignity to Black children whose histories are often reduced to conquest and enslavement and it is my hope that children finish the curriculum feeling powerful and empowered.

It cannot go without mentioning that other individuals and organisations have been influential in their endeavour to educate Muslims and non Muslims alike on Black and Black Muslim history and identity. Amongst them are Mustafa Briggs whose Beyond Bilal tour has been an eye opener for many Muslims who were previously ignorant of the reality and history of Islam in Africa and Black Muslim achievement. Additionally, Hafsah Dabiri and Nai'ma B. Robert are two authors that have provided Black Muslim representation in the children and young persons publishing sector. Finally, The Salam Project has been active for years in educating the community through workshops and events on Black excellence, the issues facing the Black community and solutions to these problems.

The ways forward for the British Muslim community I believe lies in education as both a prevention and a cure for the issues that are prevalent in our community such as anti-Black racism. As Malcolm X once said "education is the passport to the future" and supporting individuals and organisations who are seeking to uproot the problems in our community is a positive step forward to lasting change.

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