

Home » Publications » History in British Education » History in British Education (first conference)

## 'In this curriculum, I don't exist'

Marika Sherwood (Black and Asian Studies Association) (1) Email: [marika@oare.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:marika@oare.fsnet.co.uk)

The title of this paper comes from when I was running access courses some years back, which were courses for people who had dropped out of school and wanted to get back into education; they were mainly Black students. What they had said to me about their educational experience was: 'In this curriculum, I don't exist'. My problem is that many, many years later, in today's curriculum they still do not exist. I want to highlight the severity of this problem to you.

In 1991 we formed the [Black and Asian Studies Association](#). These days, I think I am the sole White committee member, which is hugely encouraging as it is so important to build the organisation on young Black people, not on ageing Hungarians! We formed the Black and Asian Studies Association in part because of the problems that we felt were going to be perpetuated by the National Curriculum. As an organised body, we were able to write to members of the government, have meetings with the [Qualifications and Curriculum Authority \(QCA\)](#) the Teacher and Development Agency for Schools, and even secretaries of state for education and heads of the [Office for Standards in Education \(Ofsted\)](#). We have been doing this since 1991, and I feel that we have not made a great deal of progress - there has simply been a lot of window dressing, nice words and well-meaning proposals. The QCA has something on its website called 'implications for teaching and learning' which gives teachers suggestions of how they could expand the curriculum - but how many teachers have the resources to do that?

As I was concerned with resources for teachers, I went to look at the libraries of two teacher training institutions. In neither is there a copy of Rozina Visram's book *Asians in Britain*, (2) a bible of the history of people from the Indian subcontinent in Britain. How can teacher-trainees be preparing anything on this subject if they have not got this absolutely basic text on their shelves? Both libraries had a couple of copies of Peter Fryer's book *Staying Power: the History of Black People in Britain*. (3) However, looking at the library stamps inside, in one library the two had been borrowed only 45 times and the other library 54 times, since publication in 1984. That does not enthuse me with hope about what is expected of trainee teachers. Teachers are being told to expand the curriculum, but how can they when their training excludes the history of the presence of Black peoples in Britain?

Before coming here today I wrote to the [QCA](#) to ask if there had been any changes in the curriculum. The response informed me that if I was interested in the history of Black people maybe I should look at a particular unit, which turned out to be on the Greeks. I replied that there seemed to be a mistake. (Although, as I told the QCA, I also had a problem with the unit on the Greeks, as it seemed to imply that the Greeks had invented absolutely everything with no mention of what they had learnt from North Africans, from India, from China or from the Arab civilisations.) The QCA response told me to have a look at a different unit, which was on Black people of America. I wrote back asking why there could not be a unit on Black people in Britain. I got no reply.

The [BASA](#) also wrote to the former secretary of state for education Charles Clarke asking questions and making suggestions for the curriculum and for teacher training. He replied suggesting that we contact the [Publishers Association](#) about the lack of resources on these subjects, and also look at the websites of the [QCA](#) and the [Department for Education and Skills \(DfES\)](#). Of course, there was nothing new on either website, but I did write to the Publishers Association and asked them to circulate a request to all their members asking what textbooks were in print and what teaching materials were available on the history of Black people in Britain. There were none, and none commissioned. I know of a recent suggestion made to a major publisher for a textbook about Black people in the Home Front. Of course, the Home Front did not just exist in Britain, and there are many examples of Black people being discriminated against when trying to volunteer for the war effort. But the publisher claimed to have no interest in that area.

From my request to the Publishers Association, I had a response from the BBC, who sent me some reasonably good material on Mary Seacole. However, I could give the BBC two dozen other names of Black people who took visible individual roles in the history of this country who still do not 'exist'. Channel 4 also responded. The material I looked at on their website was very inaccurate, and the information pertaining to the Windrush can only be described as fantasy. I looked at some other history websites which seemed very narrow. For example, when looking at World War I, some sites do represent West Indian and African troops, although there are still gaps where Indians should be. Nowhere is there a mention of the mutiny by the West Indian troops who had been trained as fighting units and were then employed as labour corps for pitiful wages. They protested and eventually mutinied because nobody listened to them. This is part of the history of World War I, and of Britain and the West Indies - and lives on in West Indian memories. How can it be omitted?

The [Department for Culture, Media and Sport \(DCMS\)](#) funded some material on understanding slavery. The sections on the actual process of enslavement, the slave ships and life in the Caribbean are generally good. But the huge problem here is that there is nothing about Africa prior to the arrival of Europeans. Therefore, the subliminal, powerful message to Black and White children is that the history of Black people begins with slavery; it does not begin with the African empires, culture, trade, science, etc. The message to my White grandchildren is that their Black friends' history begins with slavery. This is very dangerous, and we simply must not perpetrate such abuses.

To look at Asian history for a minute, I recently read a book called *The Wreck of the Abergavenny*. (4) The *Abergavenny* was an East India Company ship which had a number of Portuguese, Swedish and Danish crew although it was an English ship. Among the passengers was the Black manservant to a Mr Routledge, while among the crew were a number of Chinese, probably because the East India Company was trading in tea with China and hired crew there. It is not often mentioned, but if they were on this ship, I presume they would have been on other ships. The history that we write and how we read it can be very distorted. So when we read about how successful the East India Company was we often do not see the other side - the working classes in Britain, China or on board the ship, or the ethnicity of the crew members. How interesting and valuable it would be to have these fascinating parts of this history explicitly included in teaching and learning around this topic.

Charles Clarke told the [BASA](#) about using targeted support to meet the needs of 'Afro-Caribbean heritage' pupils in our schools in order to raise their achievement. My comment on this - which I have yet to send to his successor - is that these children do not need targeted support. What they need is for their histories, their existence, their achievements to be an integral part of the history curriculum and that of all other subjects, of science, geography, art and literature, so that they exist within the curriculum throughout their school careers, and that they and their parents should be treated with respect as equal in every way to Whites.

### Notes

1. Marika Sherwood will be speaking at the annual History of Education Society conference, 'Education for all', 2-4 December 2005. Please see the website for details, <http://www.historyofeducation.org.uk/>. [Back to \(1\)](#).
2. Rozina Visram, *Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History* (2001). [Back to \(2\)](#).
3. Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (1984). [Back to \(3\)](#).

4. Alethea Hayter, *The Wreck of the Abergavenny* (2003). [Back to \(4\)](#).

The Institute of Historical Research (IHR), Senate House, Malet Street, London WC1E 7HU  
The IHR is a member of the School of Advanced Study which is part of the University of London