Black Teachers in English schools – Pull Together, Rock the Boat or Jump Ship?

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This paper uses first-hand accounts from Black teachers in English schools to closely examine how issues of race and racial identity are infused in school policy and practice and to consider the impact upon Black teachers.

In doing so, it draws on a growing body of philosophical and sociological work that has criticised and problematised the dominance of the discourse of “standards” in teaching, how racially minoritised groups often experience epistemic injustice, and the near-erasure of race from Initial Teacher Education.

I explore the close relationship between popular conceptions of the ‘good teacher’ and notions of ‘whiteness’, and how the two are in conflict with prevailing stereotypes of particularly, “Black male”, in order to examine how the identities ‘Black’ and ‘teacher’ can be thought to be in conflict by white teachers at critical moments. A heightened level of suspicion as to the loyalty of Black teachers can contribute to an “atmosphere of exclusion” (Ahmed) with a potentially damaging effect on their status as knowers and authorities within schools.

I offer a series of vignettes (informed by conversations with six teachers, 2 headteachers and 2 teacher educators) in the tradition of the ‘chronicles’ used in Critical Race Theory and ‘examples’ for philosophical investigation. I relate these to extracts from E.R. Braithwaite’s “To Sir With Love” (1959) and in doing so highlight the continued presence and changing face of racism in English schools. I argue that Mill’s notion of ‘White Ignorance’ is more apt than Fricker’s ‘hermeneutical injustice’, in that Black teachers often demonstrate an ability to strategise effectively within an ethos of colourblindness and white denial.

I argue that Black responses to colourblindness and white denial of institutional racism, include, but are not limited to 1) fitting into an existing ethos (in the form of “moderate Blackness” (Wilkins) or “institutional passing” (Ahmed), 2) attempting to affect change from within or 3) leaving for alternative schools, educational roles or careers - pulling together, rocking the boat, or jumping ship. In discussing the second option, I consider the necessity and complexity of developing white allies.

I argue that Initial Teacher Education should involve in its content and processes, opportunities for the creation of an ‘ethic of solidarity’ (Welch) and ‘interactionism’ (Medina) so that encountering White allies is not a matter of good fortune for Black teachers but rather part of the process of becoming a teacher.