

INSPECTING AND INFLUENCING THE MICROCOSM – A CASE STUDY OF INNER CITY HIGH SCHOOL SPACES IN BRISTOL

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The last few years have seen greater interest in making schools anti-racist. The BLM resurgence of 2020, global EDI movements and increased mainstream presence of decolonial theorists have firmly positioned structural racism under the cultural microscope. It is an issue for all institutions in the UK to acknowledge and metabolise, but it is arguably most pressing for the education sector. School, after all, is a microcosm of wider society; an avenue through which cultural ideas and ideals can become internalised and anchored to a young person's framing of the world.

The macrocosm of Bristol is complex. On one hand, it is known for being progressive and forward-thinking where the lived experience of many marginalised groups are concerned. It is also a city that has a deep history of colonialism and racism, with these ideas still residing and functioning within many institutions; the educational space being one example.

Most schools want to be progressive. However, in this pursuit of progressiveness, one could argue there is a romanticised framing of future and a blissful ignorance surrounding the present. The gesture towards a more inclusive future requires deeply reflective present-tense action. The glaring reality is that most schools are not championing anti-racism but are actively, sometimes unintentionally, championing structural racism. From the vantage point of many young people of colour (YPOC), their experiences surrounding discrimination and racism aren't effectively acknowledged and validated in their school spaces. They are experiencing school in a capacity that is often disempowering, where they are constantly misunderstood and misrepresented.

As a city, Bristol has a range of external agencies that work with and for YPOC where their experiences of race and racism are concerned. One organization is Project Zazi, a team of practitioners based in Off The Record Bristol who work primarily with young people from Black and Asian backgrounds. All practitioners specialise in providing mental health support for YPOC, with this specialism not just being theoretically informed, but from a position of livedness. A lot of Zazi's work takes place in school settings, where one-to-one therapeutic support, small group workshops and bespoke educational interventions are delivered. Whilst this work is often done in collaboration with educators, there is often a lot of advocacy work that happens on behalf of YPOC.

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This article will focus on three interventions created by Team Zazi in response to frequently observed examples of structural racism in school spaces. These interventions are ‘Black Bristol’, Conscious Metabolisation Training (CMT) and The Masculinities Project. These interventions are not included in this article to demonstrate the universal need for them throughout schools in the UK. Instead, they are included to demonstrate how culturally competent interventions that address experiences of race and racism can be achieved through channelling the experiences of YPOC into the projects that seek to improve their experience of school.

Contextualising the Microcosm – Issues and Interventions

Structural racism is multi-angled and layered. It is not something that exists from one source, but rather through a complex interlinking of past framings and present apathy/unawareness within the structure under scrutiny. Most teachers are not intentionally, maliciously racist. They are, however, trained and housed within a space that has historically benefited from discriminative tendencies, that are reproduced and perpetuated if not critically examined and explored.

Project Zazi is situated in five inner city high schools in Bristol. These schools possess a high population of racially diverse students with a mostly white British teaching force. Within these spaces is a genuine desire to achieve ‘progressive practice’. There are also glaring examples of structural racism that are currently being acknowledged and metabolised through work commencing with team Zazi. The most consistently identified forms of structural racism are:

1. *Historically biased and tinted framings of past* that do not accurately convey or represent Black and Asian history
2. *Unacknowledged and unmetabolised coloniality and neurotypicality* (See CMT section)
3. *Surface level conceptual criticality*, where racial identities and experiences of racism are approached in isolation as opposed to intersectionally.

The following interventions were designed with the intention of addressing these structural shortcomings through work that centres YPOCs experiences whilst simultaneously offering solutions to better serve young people in their schools.

Addressing Historical Bias – The Black Bristol Project

A common theme emerging from Zazi’s work with YPOC was a strong dissatisfaction with history lessons, particularly the lack of accurate representation within them.

“We are learning about ourselves as if our ancestors haven’t also contributed to this country.” – Year 10 student

History is more than just education; it is an anchoring for the self-concept. It is an opportunity to situate oneself in the cultural context that exists around them and to establish links to the spaces they are a part of. History lessons in school can often be disempowering for YPOC; they are regularly taught about their past from a position of deficit (e.g. focusing solely on colonialism), have their history centred only during events like Black and/or Asian History Month or are, at times, totally omitted from contributions to British society. All of these examples produce a sense of ‘othering’, where historical narratives for YPOC are not integrated into contemporary conceptualisations of Britain. Instead, they are severed.

Schools can be complicit in this othering if they do not critically reflect on the historical context they are perpetuating. Whilst work towards decolonising aspects of history curriculums is happening, this is a longer term project that rightly requires the perspectives of many different voices and community stakeholders. However, Zazi practitioners were frequently identifying what they call ‘historical severance’ in YPOC, where they were not connected to or aware of the historical contexts that have shaped their communities. This severance was having adverse impacts on self confidence and pride surrounding one’s culture, which was in turn negatively impacting mental health. Therefore, the need to create an intervention that addressed these experiences was desperately needed.

Black Bristol is a digital resource exploring some of Bristol’s most important and often unacknowledged Black and Asian history. It was built as a way of acknowledging the needs and frustrations of YPOC, whilst simultaneously reframing the cultural spaces they were existing within. By focusing on local history, YPOC are given access to stories and experiences that not only contextualise their immediate environment better but also give them a greater sense of historical representation within the place they call home.

The purpose of this project was to create a ‘visiting, portable curriculum’ that could be used by practitioners in schools or by teachers who wish to draw on some of the resource within their lesson plans.

Since its launch in October 2020, Zazi have facilitated learning experiences for thousands of YPOC with Black Bristol with it being a massive success with young people in the classroom.

“You can feel the change in confidence from students when they have finished a section of the timeline” - History Teacher

“I am proud to be Black AND Bristolian.” – Year 7 student

Black Bristol is therefore not just an educational resource, it is an identity anchor, mental health intervention and classroom innovation lead by the experiences of Bristol’s YPOC. It is a project that attempts to deal with historical

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bias and severance in a way that empowers communities to engage with their history, whilst simultaneously giving school spaces resources to better serve their students.

Centering the Unacknowledged – Conscious Metabolisation Training (CMT)

“I feel like I am picked on every day. I can’t lie, it does feel like racism. Teachers don’t wanna hear that though” – Year 11 student

Many YPOC go through school rarely having their experiences of racism acknowledged or validated by members of staff. A common framing that Zazi see when working with YPOC are labels such ‘disengaged’ or ‘disrespectful’ being used when referring to their presentation in school. Whilst at times, these presentations can reflect an individual’s general disengagement with school, they can also be a response to the structural conditions that aren’t acknowledged and challenged by staff. Zazi like to position these structural conditions as ‘coloniality’ and ‘neurotypicality’.

Coloniality is the conscious or unconscious presentation of non-whiteness as problematic, dangerous or volatile. It draws from colonial constructions of race that have arguably not been explored, challenged and metabolised from the wider cultural zeitgeist.

Zazi argue that experiences of racism reported by YPOC are largely informed by unacknowledged coloniality in school spaces through the social construction of non-whiteness as dangerous or rebellious that has existed within the wider zeitgeist for generations. This construction informs the conscious and unconscious framing of YPOC by teachers, which ultimately influences how these young people are engaged with in school spaces. A frequent example of coloniality that Zazi see is the fixation on searching YPOC, particularly Black males for drugs if any are found on site. The hyper-construction of Black masculinity as criminal becomes projected onto young men in school, who often become innocent targets of these constructions.

Neurotypicality refers to the ways in which neurodivergent learning experiences are often unacknowledged and misunderstood in classroom settings. It is the conscious or unconscious expectation that all students should be able to engage the same with a lesson style and structure, whilst adhering to the ‘behavioural conduct’ of a classroom such as sitting still, staying focused and maintaining constant engagement throughout a lesson.

Frequent examples of neurotypicality within the school space for YPOC are constant punishments for ‘disengagement’ or ‘distractedness’ that may be contextualised through neurodiverse assessment. For example, within Black and Asian communities, ADHD is often massively underdiagnosed. However, the

coloniality that often positions YPOC as problematic or disengaged often feeds into the handling of their learning needs within classroom spaces. So what could be a potential learning need, is often framed as an individual behavioural defect. As Zazi practitioners repeatedly demonstrate, when YPOC who are typically framed as disengaged or distracted in classroom spaces are given tools like fidget toys or mutually agreed and monitored ‘movement breaks’ to help aid engagement, not only does behaviour drastically improve, but classroom performance increases too.

To help metabolise coloniality and neurotypicality from school spaces, Zazi train staff on cultural oversight and how this may present itself in their school space. These training sessions are unique in the sense that they are informed directly by experiences reported to Zazi practitioners by YPOC. The interventions themselves are therefore advocacy for students through professional development for their teachers.

Training interventions reframe coloniality and neurotypicality as conscious metabolization. It is an opportunity for teachers to contact structural narratives that often cause harm, and consciously metabolise these narratives from their framing of young people. Zazi also train teachers to be able to spot potential signs of neurodiversity in the classroom and how to implement stimuli such as fidget toys into their lessons for students who may benefit from touch based focus tools. The impact of this training has been both positive for young people and teachers within school spaces.

“The relationships have drastically improved” – Humanities teacher

“My teachers have been so kind to me lately, school has been better” – Year 8 Student

When YPOC and their experiences of school are advocated for by professionals who can mirror their experiences as well as contextualise the structural influences that frame these experiences, the training and restorative work delivered can have a profound impact on school culture. The result is a more compassionate, safer school space for all, where the opportunity to learn and relearn is normalised and encouraged.

Channelling Intersectionality – The Masculinities Project

“This is the only space I feel fully listened to” – Year 9 student, masculinity group

To effectively frame and acknowledge experiences of race and racism, there needs to be an awareness that at times YPOC will experience race differently and will need this to be considered when approaching their experiences of school. In the schools Zazi work in, they will often deliver workshops for YPOC considering race from many different angles. Some of these workshops include ‘girl talk’, that seeks to explore the intersection between femininity and race as well as ‘Acts of

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Activism’ that positions race and social action alongside intersections such as faith, class and disability.

A particularly well-received workshop series has been ‘masculinities’, where young men of colour contact masculinity through the lenses of race, gender and mental health. These workshops are delivered exclusively by male practitioners who can mirror, acknowledge and validate the experiences of young people in the space.

The masculinity series has created a space for young men to become more culturally and conceptually aware of the nuance surrounding their racialised experiences. This has not only impacted these men personally but also how they engage and interact in school with staff and peers.

Within these sessions, young men can learn about mental health, patriarchy, misogyny, race and racism from a ‘macro’ level whilst being given constant space to share personal experiences or ideas relating to the topics discussed. Practitioners will also frequently hold ‘spew spaces’, where frustrations, anger or annoyance pertaining to school and experiences of racism are held therapeutically. The combination of therapeutic ‘offloading’ and contextual understanding and awareness creates a space for young men to address their emotionality whilst contextualising their experience culturally. It provides validation and emotional recalibration that enables them to heal their personal wounds, whilst understanding the construction of the spaces around them.

Approaching race and racism in school spaces is not just about dealing with the structural cognition that can cause harm to students. It is about understanding that different groups of YPOC in the space can experience this cognition differently, and will need to be approached accordingly to metabolise this harm.

The success of the masculinity project is due to practitioners who can effectively mirror the experience of YPOC in these spaces. In some schools, access to practitioners like this may not be possible, which will ultimately affect the impact and authenticity of this work.

However, what can be concluded is that intersectional interventions surrounding racial identity can fundamentally change how young people see themselves as well as how they understand the spaces around them. The focus on intersectionally informed interventions are therefore pivotal for school spaces to consider in their approach towards working with experiences of race and racism.

Concluding Comments

This article has highlighted three ways in which structural racism is attempting to be addressed for YPOC in Bristol. Whilst there is still much work to be done, through continual collaboration with schools and YPOC in their communities, the

future for these schools continues to look positive. Exploring the microcosm is a continuous pursuit though, and just because conditions are improving, does not mean that the work is completed. Zazi will continue to monitor, consult and adapt their services to better serve YPOC in their spaces because that is the nature of the microcosm and macrocosm. It constantly changes. It constantly requires exploration and reimagination. It requires constant criticality and flexibility where working methods are concerned. And as long as there are structural issues pertaining to YPOC in schools here in Bristol, Project Zazi will be on the ground tending to the needs of those that need them most.

To stay up to date with or to support Project Zazi, please visit Project Zazi – OTR (otrbristol.org.uk)

To view and support Black Bristol, please visit www.blackbristol.com

With a deep interest in decolonising education spaces and providing students with spaces to explore, experiment and project their truths into their academic work, Lewis splits his time between mental health work and lecturing. He is currently the Manager of Project Zazi (OTR Bristol) where he has designed resources like Black Bristol. Lewis is a co-designer of sociology and psychology modules at the University of The West of England and his TEDx talk ‘The Crisis of Masculinity’ has gathered international attention on topics such as men’s mental health and masculinities.