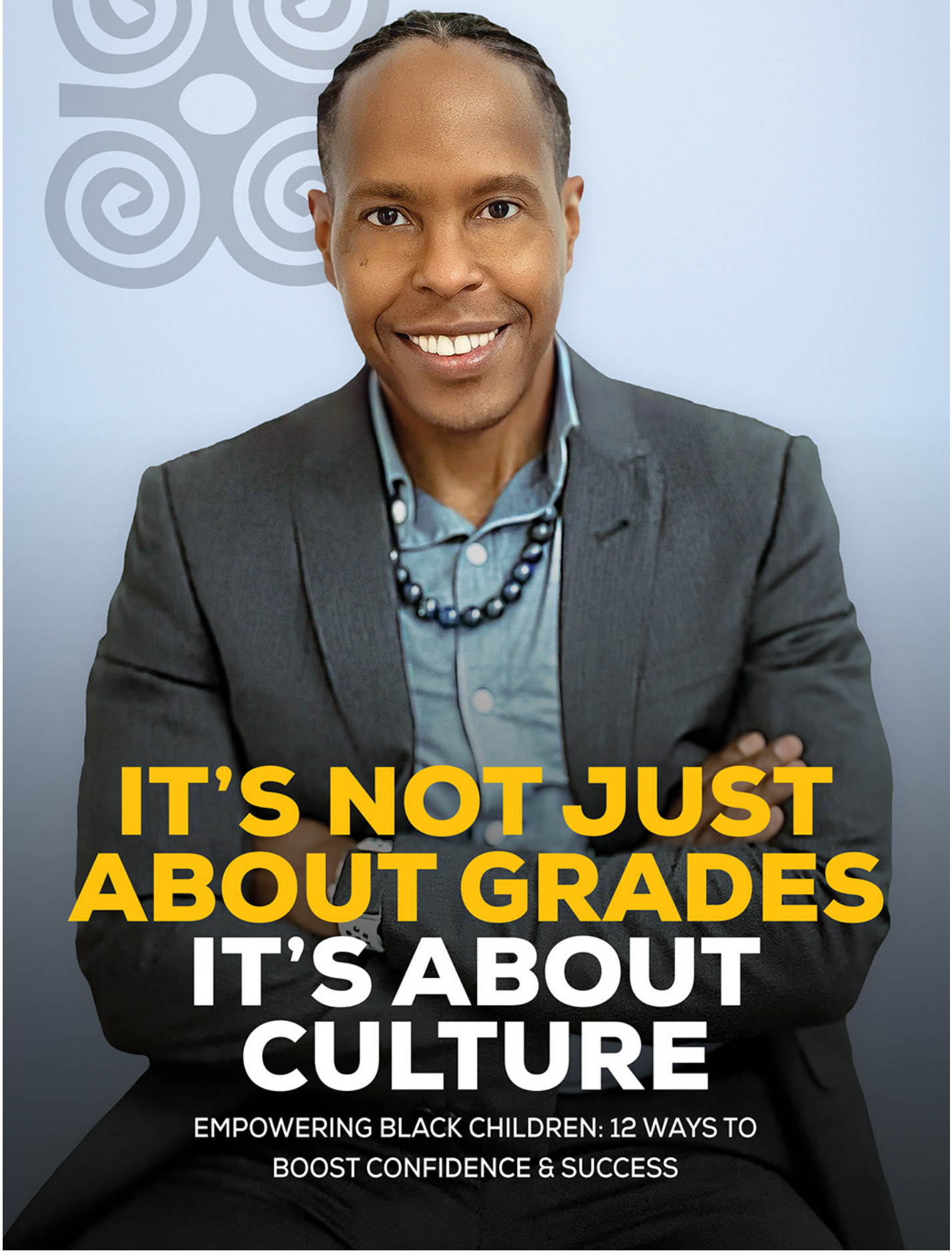
DWIGHT C. MAXWELL



IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT GRADES IT'S ABOUT CULTURE

EMPOWERING BLACK CHILDREN: 12 WAYS TO BOOST CONFIDENCE & SUCCESS

Dwight C. Maxwell is an author, published poet, speaker and Lecturer of English in the UK's further education system. He has been in English education for over 25 years, beginning in the USA and moving to the UK in 2005. Dwight put forward innovative and anti-colonial models of education. He is interested in culture as a tool for social change and a pathway to self-awareness and knowledge of self.

I would like to dedicate this book to the many students I have taught over the last 30 years, who have inspired me to write this book. Your smiles, your humour, your curiosity and your love have given me the strength to write this book in the hopes of implementing positive change in our educational system. For the children of tomorrow, we write.

Dwight C. Maxwell

IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT GRADES; IT'S ABOUT CULTURE

Empowering Black Children: 12 Ways to Boost Confidence & Success

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All of the events in this memoir are true to the best of author's memory. The views expressed in this memoir are solely those of the author.

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Table of Contents

Preface Unpacking the Colour Blind Educational System **13**

Adinkra Symbol Key **20**

Chapter One: Introduction The Racially Biased Curriculum **22**

Chapter Two: Between Culture and Biology; Culture Wars And Why Schools Can No Longer Ignore Race in the Curriculum **46**

Culture and Power *56*

Chapter Three: My Childhood And the Manley Era in Jamaica **61**

How the US Cold War Destabilised Jamaica's Education Reforms in the 1970–80s *66*

My American Odyssey…in the Belly of the Beast Culture Protects Me *71*

Chapter Four: Adinkra Symbols The Key to Unlocking Your Child's Potential **85**

Chapter Five: A Definition of Culture And Britishness **105**

The Adinkra Symbol of Nkrabea *126*

Purposeful Power/Divine Plan *126*

Lesson Plans *136*

Introduction to Nkrabea *136*

Chapter Six: Black British Culture, School Inequality And the Link to Underachievement **139**

The Symbol of Sankofa *148*

The Symbol of Sankofa: Learning From and Correcting the Past Mistakes 148

Sankofa Lesson Plan: Learning From the Past 158

Chapter Seven: Examining the Role of Cultural Identity in Student Motivation And Achievement 161

The Symbol of Ananse Ntontan 175

Lesson Plan: Understanding Human Nature Through Anansi Stories 178

Chapter Eight: Intersectionality, Culture And the Impact of the Factory Model of Education 181

The Adinkra Symbol of Adwo 196

Adwo Lesson Plan 204

Chapter Nine: The Impact of Culture on Health And Well- Being—Keys For the Successful Student 208

The Adinkra Symbol of Mate Masie 231

Chapter Ten: It Is Not Just About Grades … Investigating the Benefits of Incorporating Cultural Diversity Into the Curriculum 235

The Adinkra symbol of NEA ONNIM NO SUA A, OHU 238

Lesson Plan: Introduction to the Adinkra symbol of Nea Onnim No Sua A, Ohu 242

Chapter Eleven: Cultural Awareness And Successful Parenting 245

The Symbol of Nkonsonkonson 254

Lesson Plan: Understanding Nkonsonkonson 258

Chapter Twelve: Black Identity And White Settler Mentality in Society Breaking the Chains of Self-Hate The Paradox of Black Identity in Modern Society 260

The Symbol of Funtumfunafu Denkyemfunafu 270

Lesson Plan: Understanding Funtumfunafu Denkyemfunafu 274

Interdependence, Love and Order 274

Chapter Thirteen: Rap And the Distortion of Black Cultural Liberation **276**

The Adinkra Symbol of Okuafo PA *280*

Lesson Plan: Understanding Okuafo Pa *284*

Chapter Fourteen: Being, Becoming And Belonging: Children Rights And of Rites of Passage **289**

Rites of Passage Practices Parents Can Use to Nurture African Children Born in the West *294*

The Rights of the Unborn Child *296*

The Importance of Reciprocity in African Culture *299*

Empowering Children for the Future *299*

The Symbol of Adinkrahene *302*

Kingship, Free Will and Self-Mastery *302*

Lesson Plan: Understanding Adinkrahene *305*

Leadership and Self-Control *305*

Chapter Fifteen: Western Culture And the Adultification Bias of Negatively Minoritised Black Youth **309**

The Adinkra Symbol of Denkyem *320*

Lesson Plan: Incorporating the Principles of Denkyem Into Family Life *322*

Chapter Sixteen: Cultural Competency And the Role It Plays in Creating Equitable Learning Environments **325**

Preface
Unpacking the Colour Blind Educational System

It's Not Just About Grades—It's About Culture is a book born from a deeply personal and professional journey that has led me to challenge the status quo in education and advocate for a more inclusive and equitable system. As an educator with experience in both the British and American education systems, I have witnessed firsthand the challenges faced by students, especially those who are descendants of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, and the glaring gaps in our educational approach when it comes to addressing their unique experiences and needs.

My motivation for embarking on this project was twofold. First and foremost, it stems from a sense of responsibility as a Black male English teacher with over twenty-five years of experience teaching in public schools in the UK and the US; I felt compelled to address the disenfranchisement of Black children (a stark reality that has persisted for far too long). Generations of Black students have navigated educational systems that inadequately addressed the legacy of slavery and the generational trauma that plagues the descendants of enslaved Africans. Now more than ever, there is a dire need to address the awkwardly cringing gargantuan elephant in the classroom, dexterously balancing on a colourful beachball that is about to pop due to the strenuous pressure of its massive weight, and size that is trained to ignore and inhibit Black expression and instead propagate a white European cultural hegemony.

Far-right politicians and influencers are attempting to claw back hard-won gains achieved during the civil rights movement in America. Delusional white men in positions of power like Ron DeSantis (governor of the state of Florida) have passed laws banning the teaching of African American history in Florida schools whilst pushing a new twisted obfuscating narrative of "the benefits of

slavery". Governor DeSantis's decision to ban the teaching of Black history in Advanced Placement (AP) English courses in Florida is a stark example of white supremacy obfuscating the past in order to repress the narrative of the shameful truth of white settler colonialism and, above all, to continue to control and manipulate the definition of what Blackness is and is not. Embedded within DeSantis's assault on Black history is a "culture war" that finds its roots in the perspective of the white settler colonialism ideology. Its purpose is to revamp, revise and whitewash the brutal regime of European imperialist history by denying the atrocities of the past. By removing Black history from the high school AP (Advance Placement) curriculum, DeSantis hopes to end the debate regarding white culpability in the decimation of Native peoples and the holocaust perpetuated against millions of Africans during and after the Transatlantic Slave Trade, as well as white guilt in the genocide of indigenous peoples in other parts of the world.

Moreover, this attack upon Black identity and culture not only undermines the significant contributions of Black people to the development of American culture and society but also attempts to rewrite the histories of negatively minoritised groups through a whitewashed rebranding of facts that were documented for centuries. The aim is to revise the message and the achievement of the Civil Rights Movement by claiming reverse racism whilst denying the very existence of white racism and privileged status when juxtaposed with Black oppression, an act propagated and spearheaded by proponents of Project 2025 and supporters of the Alt-Right, such as Tucker Carlson and Ben Shapiro[1].

In The Price for Their Pound of Flesh by Daina Berry, the writer challenges and exposes the dire cruelty, the cold, calculating capitalist greed that fueled the indomitable economy of slavery:

"The commodification of enslaved people was a brutal reality, reducing individuals to mere units of labour and sources of profit." Berry's research underscores the dehumanising nature of slavery, the reductionist view of

[1] Tucker Carlson is a prominent conservative American FOX News commentator recognised for his right-wing perspectives on various issues, including affirmative action. He often criticises such policies, arguing they unfairly disadvantage white men and challenge the principle of meritocracy.

enslaved Africans as collateral by white settlers is telling, countering any argument of its "benefits." Berry continues,

"From the moment of capture, through the harrowing journey of the Middle Passage, to the auction block and beyond, the lives of enslaved Africans were marked by violence, exploitation, and a relentless struggle for survival."

The well-known ordeal and horrors of human trafficking in early 16th century America emphasises the unequivocal violence and hardship endured, dismantling any notion of slavery as beneficial. Berry continues, "The legacy of slavery is not just in the physical labour extracted but in the enduring trauma and systemic inequalities that have persisted long after its abolition." Here, she points to the lasting negative legacy of slavery, which contradicts any claims of its benefits for African Americans.

The assertion that slavery benefited Black people in America is not only historically inaccurate but also deeply ignorant and misinformed regarding the traumatic effects of systematic, government-sanctioned oppression and dehumanisation over prolonged periods (three and a half centuries: 245 years of enslavement and 90 years of Jim Crow Segregation). Such attempts to distort history will ultimately lead to more misunderstanding and move us further away from a curriculum founded on social justice principles. The implications of DeSantis' callous actions are far-reaching, affecting not only the education of Black children but also the collective understanding of the complex and painful history of racial oppression in the United States. The erasure of CRT, an essential component of Black history from classrooms, perpetuates the very systemic racism that has marginalised Black students for generations. It sends a message that their history and generational trauma are unworthy of acknowledgement and respect because it is too unsettling and disturbing for the white gaze, thus perpetuating the cycles of ignorance and prejudice that continue to plague our society.

Secondly, I felt the need to challenge the racially biased, white, monolingual, monocultural curriculum that has become the norm in many educational institutions, including in formerly colonised countries. This curriculum not only fails to reflect the diverse experiences and histories of all students but also reinforces harmful tropes and stereotypes through a systemically racist pedagogy firmly rooted in a colonial past. The English canon is replete with literature and voluminous texts written by dead white

males. The English curriculum is indeed “colour-blind”, for it mostly ignores the contributions and sacrifices made by the Global South. Most specifically, they gloss over the terror and atrocities committed by the United States and Great Britain, whitewashing and rebranding western acts of terrorism across the globe against Indigenous people; in these myopic texts, Africa still occupies a profane space within a primitive context of suffering, poverty or merely othered.

As a result, it was clear to me that there had to be a better approach a call to arms, to assist struggling parents, teachers, and students to break free from this cycle of inequity. Therefore, in the pages of this book, I aim to provide solutions. Solutions that are not just theoretical but practical and actionable. Through extensive research, reflection, and engagement with students and communities, I have concluded that we must go against the grain of the traditional curriculum. It is time for a revisionist approach that considers non-Western standards and models of education. We must eradicate the belief that the European education model is the only tool that can rescue the minds of our children from ignorance. My abundant teaching experiences have taught me that our school system owes it to all students to implement a more culturally relevant pedagogical approach when educating children from diverse backgrounds to truly liberate and empower Black students but, most importantly, to expand the consciousness and racially biased mindsets of white students and teachers. To do this, we must endeavour to step outside of the box of white fragility and white superiority and embrace indigenous knowledge and ways of seeing the world.

As such, I propose incorporating the Adinkra wisdom system of West Africa because of its robust, dynamic, character-building approach to education through wise proverbs and folklore. This powerful system of education offers a unique and transformative path to realigning students with their higher selves; it can be used to combat racism in the curriculum, motivate Black children to succeed, and enhance their academic performance. The Adinkra symbols, with their rich history dating back to the Ashanti people of Ghana, are not mere ornaments or pictograms to ogle at in meditation. They are symbols imbued with profound cultural and philosophical meanings, representing deeper values, principles, and life lessons. They are not mere abstractions. They are worn on the crowns of kings and queens and are the emblems of educational institutions across West Africa. People wear them as jewellery, their garments and homes

are decorated with them, and they are strategically carved into the fabric of society as reminders of moral codes by which to live.

Thus, incorporating these ancient but timeless symbols into the curriculum is not just a matter of representation; it's about infusing the Western monolingual education system with the wisdom and heritage of a resilient and vibrant culture as socially profound as Christmas Carol, Huckleberry Fin or Warhol's Campbell's Soup prints at the Guggenheim. In the following chapters, we will explore the history of Adinkra symbols, why they are exceptional tools that can be used to boost the self-esteem of negatively marginalised Black students' attainment and why they are essential for both parents and schools to integrate into the school curricula. We will delve into practical strategies and approaches that can be employed by educators, parents, and students alike. The aim is to enrich the educational experience and foster an environment where every student, regardless of ethnic background, feels seen, valued, and inspired to be themselves.

This book is an invitation to rethink education, challenge the status quo, and embrace a curriculum that is truly inclusive and empowering. It is a call to action for all those who believe in a future where every child, regardless of their race or heritage, has the opportunity to thrive academically and culturally. As you journey through these pages, I hope you will discover the transformative power of Adinkra symbols and join me in the quest for a more equitable and culturally enriched educational landscape. And so, in our quest to redefine education, it's essential to draw inspiration from those who have challenged conventional wisdom and paved the way for transformative pedagogy. In my research and reflection on the failing British and American school systems, I have found resonance in the groundbreaking work of Paulo Freire, particularly his seminal work "Pedagogy of the Oppressed." Freire's insights have provided a strong theoretical foundation for my exploration of the pressing issues in education and how they relate to culture, equity, and social justice.

Freire's vision of education as a tool for liberation is a beacon of hope in a system that often seems weighed down by bureaucracy and complacency. His assertion that education should serve to awaken children's consciousness aligns perfectly with this book's core message. We must recognise that education is not just about grades or rote memorisation but about nurturing compassionate, critical thinkers who can navigate a complex world with empathy and

understanding. The purpose of education, as I see it, is undeniably a moral one. It should instil in students a deep sense of responsibility for themselves and their communities. It should teach them not only how to end racism but also how to challenge all forms of prejudices, discrimination, and inequality. Education should empower them with the tools to create a more equitable and just future for all, regardless of their background.

Yet, as we examine the modern landscape of education, it is disheartening to observe that white supremacy continues to cast its shadow over our institutions. Whilst there have been strides in addressing issues of gender identity and inclusivity, the urgency of eradicating racism often takes a backseat. We must acknowledge that these issues are interconnected, and a comprehensive education that genuinely addresses the needs of all students should encompass both. This book is a call to reclaim the purpose of education. It is a call to break free from the limitations of a system that, at times, seems more concerned with appearances than with real change. We must recognise that dismantling the structures of racism is a complex and uncomfortable task, but it is a task that we cannot shy away from if we are committed to building a just society.

As we embark on this journey through the pages of *It's Not Just About Grades—It's About Culture*, I invite you to consider the profound potential of education to be a force for liberation and transformation. Together, we will explore the wisdom of Adinkra symbols and their power to reshape the curriculum, motivate students, and bridge cultural divides. We will delve into practical strategies for meaningful change in our educational institutions. This book is not just a critique of the current system but a blueprint for a more inclusive, equitable, and morally grounded approach to education. It is a testament to the belief that our children deserve an education that empowers them to be better human beings and active agents of change in a world that desperately needs it. It is my hope that you will join me on this journey as we collectively strive for a future where education is truly a force for liberation and justice.

To begin with, the Adinkra Alphabet is a phonetic Ghanaian writing system derived from symbols embedded in the languages of Akan, Ewe, Ga and Dagbani. The original Adinkra symbols were modified for ease of writing. Further modification is done from the standard Adinkra Alphabet to the simplified Adinkra Alphabet. The Adinkra Alphabet was created in 2015 by

Charles Korankye[2] heavily on pictographic symbols. The alphabet functions in three dimensions or strands, incorporating the psychological, physical and metaphysical dimensions. As a metaphysical writing system, it is very similar to the ancient Kamitic Hieroglyphic writing system in that the symbols are spiritual, scientific, philosophical and esoteric.

[2] https://www.adinkraalphabet.com

Adinkra Symbol Key



Dwennimmen

Symbol of humility together with strength.



Nkrabea

Purposeful Power/ Divine Plan.



Sankofa

Return to the past in order to correct the present.



Adwo

Peace in the face of challenges.



Ananse Ntontan

Spider's Web Wisdom, Creativity, crossroads and the complexities of life.



Mate Masie

"What I hear, I keep it." the importance of investing in one's own culture. *Nyansa bum enne mate masie* "In the depths of wisdom abound knowledge, thought and prudence."



Nea Onnim No Sua A, Ohu

"He who does not know can know from learning." Symbol of knowledge, life-long education and continued quest for knowledge.
A pursuit of knowledge/wisdom/Rights of Passage and Initiation.



Funtumfunafu Denkyemfunafu

Love, Order and Interdependence. The Siamese crocodiles share one stomach, yet they fight over food. This popular symbol is a reminder that infighting and tribalism are harmful to all.



Nkonsonkonson

Harmony, Solidarity, Oneness. "It's binding us together, in life and in death, as a single mankind, with a shared blood. We forge a new link in a continuous chain, at birth, regardless of who we are."



Okuafo PA

Good farmer productivity, Entrepreneurship, Hard Work, Diligence and Commitment.



Denkyem

Crocodile, Creativity and adaptability. "The crocodile lives in water, yet does not breathe water but air." Adapting to changing conditions in life—not being limited by one's circumstances.



Adinkrahene

Kingship, Free will and Self Mastery. "No matter how small a king is, he is not carried by one person." The symbol of Adikkrahene: self-discipline and freedom of self-expression.

Chapter One
Introduction
The Racially Biased Curriculum

It is 1960s Britain (twelve years after the first group of Black immigrants from the Commonwealth disembarked the HMT Windrush); a child of the Windrush generation sits, docile, in a predominantly white British classroom in Brixton, London. It is a school for the subnormal—a school designed for children with learning difficulties, and somehow, Black children of Caribbean descent were disproportionately represented in these schools. It was discovered later that the vast majority of Black children were deliberately misdiagnosed as ESN (educationally subnormal) by a racially biased London school system.

The Inner London Education Authority noted in 1967 that 28% of children in ESN schools were 'immigrant' and in 1973, a DES letter to all local authorities confirmed that although 'immigrant' children nationally comprise 2.4% of the total school population, 5.4% were in special schools, with West Indian children four times over-represented in ESN(M) schools. In Greater London West Indian children comprised a quarter of all the children in these schools. This injustice was later revealed in the year I was born (1971) by Bernard Coard in his tell-all book *How the West Indian Child Was Made Educationally Sub-Normal in the British School System*.

This highly politicised book caused a social and political storm across the nation by exposing the educational inequalities and institutional racism in the British educational system through the lens of the country's "educationally subnormal" (ESN) schools—previously called "schools for the mentally subnormal"—which disproportionately and wrongly enrolled Black children, especially those from the British Caribbean community. These students rarely

advanced out of ESN schools and suffered educationally and economically. Coard also intentionally made a "critical decision" to write specifically for an audience of Black parents, which is also the goal of this book. Because I believe the matter of Black children's education primarily rests in Black parents' hands, and it is about time Afro-Caribbean parents take full responsibility for how their children are educated and how this is impacting their child's consciousness and well-being.

It is well documented that Black children excel at primary school in Britain and the US, but somehow their focus and determination significantly decline at the secondary school and college level of the educational progression. This phenomenon has been ignored for decades, and sadly, Black children have been left to sink or swim in a school system that has been proven historically to be racist and ill-prepared to teach them.

This is why I have begun my introduction to this book by appealing to the reader's imagination, asking you to visualise a bright-eyed and bushy-tailed Black boy with hopes and aspirations drilled into his imagination by his Caribbean parents, who will not let him forget the reasons why they emigrated to the UK. But from the beginning, he is discriminated against by the adults entrusted to educate him. He is no different from his white or Asian classmates, except that he would most likely face numerous acts of racial prejudice throughout his childhood all the way into his adult life. He has less of a support network when compared with peers from more dominant cultures. He is just as excited to learn about who he is and to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how he came to be here in England; he is excited to know about the origins and culture of his people, their accomplishments and contributions to British society.

In this lesson, before there was ever a Black History Month, he is about to embark upon a course of study that will probably taint his sense of self and produce more insecurities, doubt and self-hate than he left home with that morning. The sum of his academic experience will be westernised entirely, with very little learning about his history, culture and traditions. In addition, being placed in an ESN school in the 1960s have severely lessen his chances for success, and his prospects of finding a middle class job to raise himself out of poverty are now limited in a culture that places a strong emphasis on GCSE results, leaving him little chances of escaping the stereotypes and tropes the dominant culture has labelled him with. Of his peers, he is the most

disenfranchised economically, socially and spiritually due to his personal intersectionality, which this book will explore in more depth in the preceding chapters.

Whereas his Asian peers are firmly rooted in their language, traditions, religions and culture, Kwesi is an African born in a colony thousands of miles from his ancestral homeland and far removed from his ancestral African culture by four hundred years of separation. Physically, he appears to be African on the outside, but within his consciousness rages an internal struggle that threatens to tear him apart. His 'Double Consciousness' sets him apart from his peers, as he is western by culture but African genetically and spiritually.

Coard's seminal book not only exposed the racism in British schools, but he also tackled the resulting trauma that is brought on by racially biased education and the impact this has had on Black children across the country. He identified three factors that were causing Black boys, in particular, to fail,: firstly, "Low expectations on his part about his likely performance in a white-controlled system of education"; secondly, "low motivation to succeed academically because he feels the cards are stacked against him"; and thirdly "low teacher expectations, which affect the amount of effort expended on his behalf by the teacher and also affect his own image of himself and his abilities."

In *It's Not Just About Grades, It's About Culture*, I add one more factor, which I believe from my teaching experience is absolutely vital and necessary to not just Black children's success but for every child being educated in the school system, and that is, the crucial dynamics and role that "culture" plays in developing the hearts and minds of young people.

So, perhaps, this is Kwei's first real encounter and exposure to the history curriculum, and maybe he is already anxious because he already has some vague, ominous feelings about what the curriculum entails for him and his kind. Up to this point in his education career, he has only learnt about British culture. As I mentioned at the start of this chapter, he is tense, anxious and nervous because even though he has not been taught the fullness of African history and culture at home, he has some awareness of slavery and some vague idea of how his ancestors were trafficked across the Atlantic in pirate ships by British, French, Portuguese and Spanish slavers, who treated his people as if they were merchandise, property and possessions as they sailed across the

tumultuous Atlantic ocean in one of the largest human trafficking scandals known to man.

This is common knowledge to every child in the classroom no exceptions. The abundance of Hollywood slave narratives broadcasted on television and on the big screens of movie theatres, ensure that most children with a television no matter where they are in the world, are certainly familiar with "slavery" and the servitude of Africans, who suffered at the hands of their white colonial masters in the West Indies, North and South America and on the continent of Africa in regions like the Congo, Nigeria and South Africa.

Kwesi will learn then, this brutal, appalling trade in human beings, involved tens of millions being forcibly removed from their homes, betrayed by neighbouring tribes, who fought to tip the balance of power in their regions with new weapons given to them by the white man in exchange for sacking and burning the villages of their enemies and shackling their men, women and children in chain gangs, dragging the defeated enemies to the coast to meet their captors. The fact is, when Education Secretary Michael Gove announced he wanted to "refocus the teaching of history in schools" to celebrate the distinguished role of these islands in the history of the world, he also removed the curriculum's explicit focus on racial and ethnic diversity, particularly within Britain.

This made the teaching of Black history optional as he left it up to schools to decide whether they would teach and explore African history and of course in the majority of schools in the UK, teaching Black history was limited and shallow, and dreary and predictable, with a narrow focus on the transatlantic slave trade and a pat on the back for white men, such as William Wilberforce, whose efforts according to the history curriculum, freed African slaves from servitude by appealing to his fellow politicians in the House of Parliament. And it is true that Wilberforce did appeal to the conscience of the members of parliament to end the abominable slave trade. But it was not his entreaty alone that turned the tide for enslaved Africans—many historians cited rebellions among the enslaved and the ever-increasing population of Africans on the islands as the chief reasons leading to the ending of the slave trade. Heroes like Nanny of the Maroons in Jamaica, the Haitian Revolution and numerous slave rebellion in the US had placed the entire European slaveholding nations in a state of heightened alert regarding their African captives.

But most egregiously, unlike other ethnic groups, Black children are constantly reminded that the entirety of their history began with enslavement—and all they learn about is the unspeakable horrors and dehumanisation that their enslaved ancestors endured, packed tighter than a can of sardines, on the perilous, demoralising, treacherous journey from the African continent all the way to the so-called new world. Very little is known or included in the school curriculum about Africa before the European invasion. However, most recently, there has been some attempts to teach about the Moorish conquest of Spain and other parts of Europe and their contribution to European civilisation by ushering in advancements in such areas as architecture, science and introducing Algebra and spearheading the creation of universities, but this is not officially apart of the UK school curriculum. Meaning it is not sanctioned by the DFE.

There have also been discussions about Mansa Musa, the wealthiest man in history, who caused inflation wherever he went due to his unmatched reserves of gold, which he would give away to locals as he travelled on his journey to Mecca. Some schools have even tackled the exploits of Hannibal of Carthage, who attempted to invade and annex the Roman empire to his North African empire. Unsurprisingly, these snippets of African history are only a blip or more accurately, a sporadic and random occurrence in some schools in the UK, where a concerted effort is made to address the dire need for a wholistic history curriculum that includes the contribution of Africans.

So, let's get back to that classroom, where Black history is being ignorantly delivered, whitewashed and reduced to what is just a small footnote in the annals of African history—the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The well-intentioned but poorly trained white monolingual, monocultural teacher attempts to convey the magnitude of the atrocities by either showing graphic images of enslavement to illicit emotions in children to arouse feelings of anger or by reading books written by "dead white men," such as *Of Mice and Men* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, where these authors flaunt white privilege as they boldly use the n-word in racist, demeaning dialogues that dehumanises and present Black characters as subhuman. What we must keep in mind is that both Steinbeck and Harper Lee wrote for a white audience. These texts were never meant for Black students but were instead written to educate white people about their racist and unjust attitudes towards Black Americans.

I have seen Black students slump angrily in their seats as Crooks is reduced to the n-word by Curley's wife as she threatens to have him hung from a tree for speaking out of turn. Once, my Year 9s reported to me that a white colleague had used the n-word whilst talking about the book, and they made it clear to me that they believed she deliberately used the word to offend them, using the book as a licence. They had been rebelling against the text all term, but the teacher continued to teach the text, ignoring her students' protests. I have had parents phone me up to complain about Steinbeck's masterpiece, reporting that their child had come home in tears after being forced to read the n-word in class. I cringed as a teacher of African descent as I was forced to read the heated argument between the lonely, isolated character of Crooks and the nameless female character, known only as Curley's wife (an allegorical female character used by Steinbeck to exemplify women's dependency on men in a patriarchal society).

In exploring the intricate realm of racial dynamics, the contentious issue of the n-word emerges as a subject that seems to elude the attention of many white individuals. Curiously, despite its widespread offensive and derogatory nature among Black communities across the globe, this problematic epithet is often overlooked. Rooted in harmful stereotypes, it serves as a tool to alienate, vilify, and dehumanise Black individuals, painting them as ignorant, violent "super-predators" and beyond human. By delving into John Steinbeck's utilisation of this loaded and racist trope and what it signifies in our society, one can discern how the essence of white privilege is blind to the pain it inflicts on those who must bear the brunt of it.

As a white male, Steinbeck's utilisation of such lexis, normalised during America's bigoted past, embodies the epitome of privilege. In Steinbeck's era, using the n-word to address a Black person was as routine as saying good morning to a neighbour. It was used as a term of address, like sir or miss and even the Black community during this era referred to each other pleasantly, using it as casually as a pronoun, noun or even as an adjective to describe their neighbour, friends, family members and enemies alike. Later in the 70s, it was said to be a term of endearment among Black Americans, which must have seemed shocking and bizarre by the rest of the world witnessing the Civil Rights Movement in the US—reclaiming harmful lexis that had huge psychological implications for the user; lexis that was seen as vulgar and taboo among conscious Blacks globally who understood the historical significance

and the psychological Why, one may ponder, does this repugnant word find its place within the British school curriculum, despite being the very embodiment of so much anguish and torment?

Perhaps the answer can be found in W.E.B Dubois' seminal text, *The Souls of Black Folks*, where he coined the term 'Double Consciousness' to explain the cognitive dissonance that is so prevalent in the Black community when it comes to the use and application of this terrible word that has caused so much pain and anxiety. The contradiction that is so deeply ingrained in the presumed ownership of lexis that was created to destroy you, and your kind is indeed irrational and self-defeating by all accounts. And yet, this same epithet is also used in a condescending and demeaning manner among Blacks to ridicule and belittle one another.

In the annals of history, this word held a significant purpose: to assert dominance over Black Americans, reminding them of their inferior place in society and the expendability of their lives. It was a chilling reminder that their very existence could be snuffed out without consequence. A mere whisper from a distressed white woman, a lingering gaze or unwarranted touch, or the mere misfortune of being in the wrong place at the wrong time could trigger unspeakable violence. Countless "negroes" fell victim to lynching in the south, their only crime being the unfortunate colour of their skin. Emmett Till paid a horrific price for the simple act of casting a knowing wink at a white woman in a grocery store.

The term gained significance during a time when African Americans were systematically oppressed, silenced, and stripped of power and agency under a violent, white-dominated structure. It came to represent the deep-rooted forces of systemic oppression and disenfranchisement that burdened their daily lives. Throughout the tapestry of American history, this word functioned as a potent weapon, stripping away the very essence of Black people's humanity, branding them as less than fully human, reduced to a dehumanising three-fifths.

Unfortunately, the n-word was re-popularised during the early 1990s in the US by a new genre of rap music called 'gangsta rap'. This new brand of rap came into being in the so-called 'hood', among men and boys who had little prospects available to them due to extreme poverty, broken families, and a debilitating drug epidemic that left thousands of poor Black communities devastated. This coupled with poorly funded schools, a lack of opportunities, and little to no investments from both the private and public sectors into Black

communities, created a hotbed for gangs, and gangsta rap became a direct response to the blatant injustices experienced by urban African American youth, who faced constant harassment and brutality at the hand of local law enforcement. This new, raw, harsh, sharp-sounding rap could be identified by its hardcore sexual imagery and street-tough lyrics whilst glorifying Black-on-Black violence.

Born on the harsh, violent streets of Los Angeles, it was first publicised by rappers such as Ice T, and rap groups like NWA (N-Word with Attitude), and Public Enemy and later popularised by star legends such as Tupac Shakur and The Notorious B.I.G. Both legends were tragically killed in an East Coast West Coast gangsta brawl. At the centre of gangsta rap was this hateful, harmful epithet, which caused controversy whenever it was spoken. Schools in New York banned the word from being used by students; debates sparked across the country as whites challenged African Americans for the right to use the word as loosely as Black Americans used it among themselves. African Americans rejected white American arguments, claiming ownership of a word that only a few decades earlier were used against their parents and grandparents to dehumanise and destroy their dignity and racial pride. Black youths called it a term of endearment and happily bandied the euphemism around as if it meant love or joy. It was used interchangeably to show anger and disgust or joy and delight. It is a word of severe contradiction and pain, a word that killed or armed its user.

So when I courageously announced my disenchantment with Steinbeck's novel and questioned the negative impact it was having on the hearts and minds of my Black British students in a department meeting, I faced a slew of opposition and challenges from my female colleagues, who argued to keep the text on the syllabus. It was clear to me then that neither the white or Asian teachers understood or could relate to the trauma associated with this immensely controversial word and its notoriously dark history that had distorted and tortured the souls of a whole people for over four centuries. They just did not understand why such an acclaimed novel could cause offence and spark such furious debates.

To them Steinbeck was a Nobel Laureate, who could do no wrong, despite the sensationalism in the brutal execution of Lennie by George at the end of the novel, the blatant misogynistic portrayal of Curley's wife and the racist language used to depict Crooks as an envious, bitter character who longed to fit

in with the white men, who ignored him. In the realm of the English department, where the composition of faculty revealed a predictable pattern (as one might anticipate within the structure of the UK school system), I found myself occupying a peculiar position. A lone figure among my colleagues, I stood as the sole Black male English teacher, and moreover, the only staff member who dissented against the inclusion of Steinbeck's acclaimed novel, *Of Mice and Men*, within the department's KS3 curriculum—a curriculum predominantly populated by white and Asian women.

The journey to challenge the presence of this literary work demanded a meticulously crafted missive, a letter to the head teacher that artfully recounted the historical connotations of the abhorrent racial epithet and deftly illustrated the psychological harm inflicted upon Black children through its textual dissemination within secondary schools.

Moreover, it became evident that this controversial novel had been cast aside within the United States, shunned from the educational landscape due to the unflinching presence of racial prejudice and sexism pervading its pages. The discriminatory brushstrokes employed in the portrayal of Crooks, a character trapped within the confines of stereotype, held particular weight in the decision to banish the book from American classrooms. The repercussions of this narrative on the mental well-being of African American students and their families were nothing short of traumatic, inciting an impassioned outpouring of protests from parents, fervently advocating for the proscription of this text within the realm of public education.

In due course, the head teacher, having been swayed by my reasoning, decided to expunge Steinbeck's lauded creation from the Year 9 syllabi. My mission, fuelled by an unyielding determination to remove this Nobel Prize-winning novel, reached its triumphant conclusion. The Black students, profoundly grateful for the presence of an educator who comprehended the indomitable emotions they endured as the text was unfurled within the confines of their English lessons, breathed a collective sigh of relief. The n-word, like a barrage of piercing arrows, had hitherto been etched into their consciousness, and the removal of this injurious literary piece provided solace in their journey towards healing.

Recently, a 2023 BBC news report entitled: Call to remove *Of Mice and Men* from GCSE course—captioned *Angel Mbondiya wants Of Mice and Men to be removed from the GCSE curriculum*—is the most recent appeal by a

student of colour to the CCEA (Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment), to remove the well-debated text from the exam specification. In a thought-provoking article, a bold Belfast student has taken a stance, fervently advocating for the removal of *Of Mice and Men* from the revered GCSE English literature course. This impassioned plea, originating from a student of colour who possesses an astute comprehension of the intricate layers underlying Crooks' character, and the language employed to depict him, does not come as a surprise. The n-word, heavily laden with historical weight and lingering connotations, permeates the narrative landscape, rendering it a deeply contentious topic.

According to recent research conducted by the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom, *Of Mice and Men* is placed among the esteemed ranks of the one hundred most challenged books from 2010 to 2019. Yet many schools in Britain continue to teach this controversial book, often ignoring the effects of the past on the present. Angel, the bold voice advocating for change, highlights the book's inherent violence, intertwined with a profound exploration of racism and its repercussions, directly affecting not only her own life but also that of fellow Black students within their shared classroom. In her conversation with BBC News NI, Angel emphasised the significant impact such a book has had on her consciousness. Unfortunately, her pain and suffering go unnoticed by her white teachers in her predominantly white school, where the administration and teaching staff are also mainly white. And because racism is so normalised in our society, the complaints and discontent of marginalised groups often go unnoticed or are dismissed due to the divisive and polemical nature of race relations in our multicultural society.

Black teachers, parents and students daring to question the entrenched white monocultural curriculum encounter a distressing dearth of empathy and, at times, backlash as some white teachers feign ignorance and a perplexed confusion about the impact of the n-word. Within these educational institutions, the portrayal of Black students as aggressive, disruptive and a menace to society is quietly endured, reinforcing the narrative that they are in constant need of the salvation and guidance of "white helpers" (Migliarini) to liberate them from their perceived self-destructive attitudes and cultural decadence. The weight of this resistance to acknowledging their experience burdens Black students and teachers, who remain acutely aware of the unwavering rigidity

exhibited by the majority of schools when confronted with complaints about racist practices, whether conscious or unconscious.

Recent visits to schools in Smethwick and Kings Norton in the UK really gave me raised eyebrows when the heads of both English departments boasted that one of their favourite novels to teach was *Of Mice and Men*. It is ironic that so many white teachers still hold Steinbeck's novel in such high esteem, even though he flagrantly bandied about the n-word in an attempt to create realism and perhaps to convey the trauma experienced by Black people or perhaps it was to portray the burning social issues during the Great Depression in the United States. Though this may seem noble to some, the impact of reliving such traumatic events in a classroom setting is deeply disturbing for Black students. This detachment from the plight of the students they teach, and their historical trauma is systematic of the ahistorical curriculum often taught by teachers who are not particularly sympathetic to the intersectionality of black children. Interestingly, this department head in Smethwick was from a South Asian background, and the school was predominantly comprised of ethnic minority students. Sadly, she was willing to teach a text with such a loaded trope, knowing that students would be reading the n-word out loud, knowing the historical and political nature of the word and how controversial it still is in the Black community.

Very rarely do Black teachers celebrate such literary texts written by authors such as Steinbeck that attempt to explore the suffering and exclusion of Africans from society, this is partly due to the controversy surrounding the n-word. We feel we own it, though it is a horrendous and terrible word that is like a burning ulster within our stomachs. The dehumanising connotations and abject shame and suffering attached to its use represent our powerlessness in the face of white supremacy. So, Steinbeck's endearing and bold use is hardly comforting to Black individuals; rather, it is a reminder of our shame and our historical trauma.

The destruction of Black civilisation mandated the suppression of Black worldviews, including our spiritual traditions. Similarly, the erasure of Black consciousness required the deletion of Black accomplishments, and the insertion of a colonial system designed to devalue and minimise the importance of all things African. In Western education, this systemic erasure is glaringly evident in the exclusion of African Traditional Religions (ATRs) from religious studies curricula. While UK and US schools teach a range of major world

religions—Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, and Sikhism—ATRs such as Yoruba cosmology, Vodou, Santería, and the ancient Egyptian belief systems are notably absent.

The question is, why do Western curricula continue to ignore African philosophy and religious practices in favour of Eastern religions? What does this omission reveal about the lingering colonial biases in education? And how does it perpetuate harmful stereotypes about Africa and its contributions to human civilisation? And finally, how does this false hierarchical representation of religions in the school curriculum impact the self-esteem of Black children?

In a colonised curriculum, as the Black child unearths the truth of their heritage, they encounter a narrative of dehumanisation and displacement, an overwhelming sense of defeat and subjugation beneath the heavy yoke of white supremacy. Yet, no full understanding of their African identity is conveyed to them. As Professor Heidi Safia Mirza, a leading scholar on race and education, argues, the curriculum often fails to reflect the rich, multifaceted histories of Black people, reducing their experiences to oppression and struggle while omitting their contributions to global knowledge, culture, and innovation. Similarly, Professor Paul Gilroy, in his seminal work *The Black Atlantic*, highlights how the erasure of Black intellectual and cultural achievements perpetuates a fragmented identity among Black students, leaving them disconnected from their ancestral legacy.

The child may receive instruction on the Civil Rights Movement and, perhaps, on the Black Lives Matter protests, but as Dr Kehinde Andrews, a prominent Black studies scholar, notes, these moments are often taught as isolated events rather than part of a continuum of Black resistance and excellence. Little exploration is done regarding the grand achievements and profound impact of their illustrious forebears, such as the scientific contributions of figures like Charles Drew or the philosophical insights of Anna Julia Cooper, who played key roles in shaping the very fabric of the world we inhabit today. This lack of truth fosters miscommunication and stereotypes among white and Asian peers, who are likely to perceive the history of Black people solely through the lens of slavery and colonisation. As Dr Gurminder K. Bhambra's research on coloniality and education reveals, this narrow framing reinforces racial hierarchies and perpetuates systemic inequities in the classroom.

This lesson, by its very nature, proves to be deeply traumatic and divisive, leaving the Black child burdened with a profound sense of shame and a disconnection from their own identity. Professor Beverly Daniel Tatum, in her work on racial identity development, underscores how the absence of positive representation in the curriculum can lead to internalised racism and a diminished sense of self-worth among Black students. Unfortunately, this trauma of shame from a lack of positive representation often goes unnoticed by many white and other non-Black teachers in Britain and the US. As Dr Nicola Rollock's research on racial disparities in education highlights, the failure to address these curricular gaps reflects a broader systemic neglect of Black students' needs and experiences, perpetuating cycles of marginalisation and erasure. By centring the voices and insights of these Black scholars, it becomes clear that a decolonised curriculum is not merely an academic imperative but a moral one, essential for fostering equity, understanding, and healing.

Although nearly all secondary schools in England teach some elements of Black history, the curriculum is often woefully inadequate, particularly when it comes to slavery and the 20th-century Black experience. Too often, children are asked to participate in insensitive and inappropriate activities, such as role-playing slave auctions or writing letters from the perspective of Emmett Till's killers (Evening Standard, Cusworth, June 2020). Parents across the UK and the US are rightly outraged by the clumsy, tone-deaf approach taken by white monolingual, monocultural teachers towards Black history and culture. This is particularly troubling in the United States, where African Americans are roughly 15% of the public-school population. The lack of empathy and understanding towards language-minoritised, negatively racialised groups is both astounding and blatantly racist. The ignorance of white English Language Teachers (ELT) who remain firmly entrenched in "settler-colonial histories and legacies" (Stinton and Migliarini 2022) creates a toxic learning environment for Black students, who have historically been marginalised, oppressed, and demoralised by a school system that has a shameful legacy of racial segregation and discrimination.

The sidelining of ATRs in religious studies is rooted in the colonial project that sought to portray African cultures as "primitive" and inferior. African spiritual systems were demonised as witchcraft or fetishism to justify slavery and colonial exploitation, and this practice is subtly being reinforced by the deliberate exclusion of some of the oldest religions known to man. This

dehumanising narrative allowed colonisers to impose their religions while systematically dismantling indigenous ones. As Yonah Matemba, a scholar advocating for decolonised education, explains: "The exclusion of African perspectives from religious education perpetuates colonial hierarchies, presenting a Eurocentric worldview as universal while relegating African spirituality to the realm of taboo." This exclusion is not a passive oversight—it actively sustains the prejudices and power dynamics of the colonial era.

Going back to the anecdote at the beginning of this chapter. After his history lesson, our first-generation Windrush child leaves his classroom depressed and traumatised, his demeanour and countenance placid. He pushes through a sea of white and brown faces to make his way out of a nightmarish history lesson that forced him to relive the trauma of his ancestors, a lesson peppered with traces of racist lexis such as "the slaves" instead of "the enslaved," "master" instead of "human trafficker," "slave owner," etc., which are offensive and dehumanising and disempowering terms. In fact, the whole term long experience has been traumatic—it is as if he was reliving the tortures and horrors that his ancestors experienced on the slave ships as they journeyed through the Middle Passage, packed like sardines, chained and bound in the hull of the Good Ship Jesus, lying in the blood and excrement of their fellow captives. The travesty of this gut-wrenching experience lies in the ignorance of white monolingual, monocultural teachers, whose pedagogy is based on a "colour-blind" approach, which ignores the intersectionality of students of colour.

According to Stinton and Migliarini, "white ignorance is active and strategic", meaning that racism-white supremacy is constantly at work in the day-to-day operations of our children's lives. Therefore, it can be argued that the obfuscation of Black representation in the English language curriculum and the disconnect of white monocultural English teachers from the demographics they teach is more deliberate than accidental. This is a core theme within the system and influence of white supremacy, which employs ignorance as a tool to disregard the impact of white racism on negatively racialized minority groups.

Whilst employed in a secondary school in Birmingham, UK, I vividly recall a white male colleague asking students to jot down the pros and cons of slavery in their exercise books in preparation for a debate. Imagine the impact of this debate on the descendants of the formerly enslaved. I've been in schools where

teachers taught about the benefits of Western imperialism in developing nations, and I have used a variety of textbooks that posited similar questions about the pros and cons of white settlers colonising the Americas. Such racist questions are often assigned without any consideration about how they will impact the hearts and minds of negatively minoritised students who are forced to participate in these morally reprehensible experiments that further justify and minimise their historical trauma.

These racially biased activities, which assume that any positives might arise from the exploitative practices of colonisation of an entire population, hold little merit in enhancing students' ethical development, sense of democracy, or even their critical thinking skills. This viewpoint is morally reprehensible, to say the least, and may even promote the idea that colonising and dominating others for economic and political gains could have merit and some benefits for society.

In a thought-provoking Washington Post article by Brandon Kendhammer titled "A Controversial Article Praises Colonialism. But Colonialism's Real Legacy is Ugly" (Washington Post 2017), Kendhammer delves into the recent journal article authored by Bruce Gilley. Gilley's piece, "The Case for Colonialism," stirred a heated debate by suggesting that the widely held "orthodoxy" portraying Western colonialism as universally detrimental to the colonised peoples and nations might be overstated. According to Gilley, in many instances, colonialism held both objective benefits and subjective legitimacy. This viewpoint aligns with the perspectives of various far-right groups, including the MAGA movement in the United States, which has sought to ban Critical Race Theory (CRT) in schools under the guise of protecting national unity and preventing so-called "divisive" teachings.

Much like Gilley's attempt to reframe colonialism as a potentially beneficial force, the MAGA movement's opposition to CRT reflects a broader effort to whitewash history and absolve contemporary society of accountability for past and ongoing systemic injustices. By framing discussions of colonialism, slavery, and racial inequality as exaggerated or harmful, both Gilley and the MAGA movement perpetuate a narrative that seeks to downplay the exploitation and violence inherent in these systems. This parallel is particularly striking given the MAGA movement's emphasis on stricter border controls and reduced minority rights, which echo the colonial logic of domination and exclusion. Both ideologies attempt to absolve themselves of

culpability for the atrocities committed by their predecessors, who amassed wealth and power through the exploitation of marginalised groups and former colonies. In doing so, they not only distort historical truths but also reinforce structures of inequality that continue to shape our world today.

Gilley, a former political scientist at Portland State University, who studies Chinese politics, resigned his membership in the American Political Science Association due to its "alleged" lack of political diversity. Kendhammer reported that "thousands of studies on the topic find that whilst colonial rule brought some improvements in economic growth and long-term health and well-being, many of the post-colonial world's economic and political difficulties (including corruption, poor economic productivity and violence) are directly linked to colonialism and the geopolitical system it created." In fact, the destructive legacy of colonialism is the primary reason for much of Africa's interrupted economic growth and failed infrastructure development.

Gilley argued that former colonies would be worse off if it were not for Western intervention. This is a classic reference to the idiom of the "white man's burden," an idea that Black and Brown people would be helpless without intervention from whites and are dependent on them for survival. The idiom **"the white man's burden"** originates from a poem of the same name written by Rudyard Kipling in 1899. The phrase is deeply rooted in the ideology of colonialism and imperialism. It refers to the notion that white Europeans and Americans had a moral obligation or duty to "civilise" and "uplift" non-white, non-Western societies, which they viewed as backwards, uncivilised, or inferior. This ideology was used to justify the colonisation, exploitation, and domination of people in Africa, Asia, the Americas, and other parts of the world. The phrase reflects a paternalistic, ignorant and racist worldview, suggesting that white people were inherently superior and responsible for governing and "improving" the lives of colonised peoples, often through forced assimilation, cultural erasure, and economic exploitation. While it was framed as a benevolent mission, it served to mask the brutal realities of colonialism, including violence, resource extraction, and the subjugation of indigenous populations.

This racist ideology was used to shield white society from the crimes it had committed against those it had once deemed inferior adversaries. For instance, economists James Robinson and Leander Heldring find that for former European colonies in Africa, the alleged "benefits" of colonial rule did these

societies less good than if they had gained access to new technologies and markets independently. They also discovered that colonialism's other ills (including racism, classism, political repression and economic exploitation) cancelled out any positive effects. Other researchers, such as Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, argue that one reason for this trend is that colonial rulers chose policies designed to extract resources from already wealthy societies or societies that possessed easily accessible natural resources, without paying much attention to political or human rights.

There is a plethora of examples that clearly illustrate the destructive, detrimental impact of colonialism on people of colour globally. Still, white fragility will not allow those who teach our children to challenge and account for their past actions. This is primarily a result of the way the British and American secondary school curricula are designed and organised. It was established to promote Western colonial culture and values and to produce administrators to bolster and maintain the system of neo-colonialism in many respects.

In 2023 in the USA, the state of Florida, under the governorship of Ron DeSantis, opted to ban AP African American Studies (which was strategically and controversially placed under the banner of Critical Race Theory) from schools to stop conversations about race but in particular white America's culpability in the genocide and destruction of the culture and communities of Black Americans. He argued that the course violates state law and "lacks educational value." DeSantis officially banned the course in a letter from the state education department to the College Board, which administers college readiness exams like the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). They also oversee Advanced Placement (AP) courses, which allow students to earn college credits in subjects like English and chemistry.

This egregious decision has sparked numerous debates and reprisals from African American communities across the US. The attack on Black history and culture reveals DeSantis's ignorance of American history and, more dangerously, his ignorance of the positive contributions and extended suffrage of American Blacks over the past four centuries to the greatness of the United States. To deny the people who literally built America access to their history in the public school system is racist and beyond evil and shows his obvious political agenda to erase, suppress and dismiss America's racist past from the annals of history. According to Guardian contributor Abené Clayton,

“DeSantis, a one-time Donald Trump ally, plays an active role in stoking social and political anxieties, primarily among white Americans, that stem from conversations about race and gender that occur on K-12 public school campuses” (Guardian 2023).

Ironically, DeSantis did not opt to change gun laws in Florida to address the recent Parkland High shooting, where seventeen students were murdered by a fellow classmate. Clearly, the issue with the school curriculum has nothing to do with the teaching of African American history. Still, it offers an opportunity to foster meaningful structured debate around America’s past and how this might impact current attitudes to race and violence within both white and Black communities. Moreover, DeSantis’s attack on Black culture is indicative of a broader social and political issue that affects Black students and their families in the broader educational system that is not being adequately addressed by those in power.

But the most tragic thing about your child’s experience is not necessarily the travesty of how Black history is taught in academia, but the idea that this is perhaps the only history they will learn about their past. Of course, the curriculum will definitely include the civil rights movement and the heroic actions of people like Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr and Malcolm X. Ironically, Black students will have an abundance of opportunities to learn about the Greeks, the Romans, the Vikings, the Tudors, the Visigoth and so much European, Asian and Middle Eastern Histories that they will begin to imagine and see ancient civilisations as creations of white and Asian people and by doing so negate and devalue their ancestors’ contribution to history.

Unfortunately, many of your children will adopt the view that Black Africans contributed very little to world history and civilisation. They will come to believe that Europeans gave civilisation to the world and Africa suffers from a civilisation problem as it battles with its intrinsically primitive nature. Narratives about Africa’s lack of civilisation are still being spun by the political elite and the Western media. Recently, Emanuel Macron, French President, stated that the problem with Africa is a “civilisation one”, further solidifying Western attitudes and beliefs about the continent. Africa’s relationship with France is exploitative and undermining, as the French continue to reduce the continent to a vassal state for the purpose of extracting resources and producing a labor force to support the development of France. This relationship is

indicative of the Western curriculum and the positioning of Black students within it.

Let's pause for a moment and consider this: What happens to a child's mind when they grow up in an education system that systematically erases their history? What happens when the stories they're told—or, more importantly, the stories they're *not* told—leave them feeling invisible, disconnected, and alienated from their own identity? Imagine a young student sitting in a classroom, year after year, hearing about their ancestors only through the lens of slavery, colonisation, and subjugation. What does that do to their sense of self-worth? To their ability to see themselves as fully realised, proud, and whole human beings?

Now, think about the psychological toll of what W.E.B. Du Bois called "Double Consciousness"—that sense of always looking at yourself through the eyes of others, measuring your worth by a standard that was never meant to uplift you. What happens when a child is forced to navigate a system that not only denies them the truth of their heritage but also bombards them with a narrative of defeat and inferiority? Will they walk out of school with a deep, unshakable pride in who they are? Or will they leave carrying the weight of resentment, confusion, and anger—anger at a system that reduced their history to a single, painful story of oppression, while ignoring the richness of their culture, the brilliance of their ancestors, and the resilience that carried them through?

And here's the real question: Is it any surprise that so many of these children grow up feeling disconnected, disillusioned, and even betrayed? When all they see is a story of domination and destruction—when they're taught that their ancestors were merely victims, not creators, thinkers, or leaders—what does that do to their sense of possibility? To their belief in themselves? The truth is that the stories we tell our children matter. They shape how they see the world, how they see others, and, most importantly, how they see themselves. And when those stories are incomplete, or worse, when they're designed to diminish, the consequences can last a lifetime.

My point is simply this: if schools focus on the positives of Black history and culture, which predates the Transatlantic Slave Trade, colonialism, etc., then they will have a better chance of reforming and educating Black children to aim high and achieve greatness. This sort of education would certainly

reduce violent child-on-child violence in Black communities and promote high attainment.

Imagine this: you're a Black teacher in the UK, standing in front of a classroom for nearly two decades. You've spent eighteen years in secondary schools and colleges, working alongside headteachers and department leads, trying to do something radical—something that, on the surface, seems simple but is anything but. You're trying to rewrite the story. Not just any story, but the story of Black history, a story that has been fragmented, sanitised, and, in many cases, erased entirely from the national curriculum. And you're doing it in a system where, for most of the year, Black history is treated as an afterthought—something to be dusted off and displayed once a year, in October, during Black History Month.

But here's the thing: you know it's not enough. You know that a single month, no matter how well-intentioned, can't undo centuries of omission and distortion. So you take your mission beyond the classroom. You walk into prisons, standing in front of young men of colour who've been failed by the same system you're trying to change. And you tell them a different story—one that doesn't start with slavery or end with abolition. You take them back to an Africa that existed long before the transatlantic slave trade, an Africa of empires, innovation, and profound contributions to world civilisation. You show them a history that isn't defined by oppression but by resilience, creativity, and brilliance. Your goal? To dismantle the myth of a history-less Africa. To challenge the idea that Black history is a footnote in someone else's story. And to push for something bigger: the decolonization of the British national curriculum. You're not just teaching history; you're trying to change the way an entire society sees itself. Because when you change the story, you change the way people think. And when you change the way people think, you change what they believe is possible.

I am here to make a critical argument to Black parents, as well as to the school systems both in the UK and the United States, that there is, indeed, a critical need for the teaching of indigenous African traditional cultures and histories in our homes and schools. The value and importance of cultural capital when it comes to Black people and the African continent have been largely ignored by Europeans to avoid the issue and absolve themselves of their role in the Transatlantic Slave Trade and especially to deny their role in the underdevelopment of the African continent. The sovereignty, humanity and the

intelligence of Africans have been questioned, probed and challenged since the advent of colonisation by European countries.

Highly debated in the hollow halls of white academia and wilfully undermined and deemed irrelevant by some leading academics, the Black experience is fighting for recognition and acceptance even from people of colour. It was argued by Hegel, for example, that Africa is in fact a history-less continent which had failed to produce any great civilisation. President Emmanuel Macron was recently criticised for failing to highlight the role played by colonial powers in the underdevelopment of the African continent and instead blaming "civilisational" problems and women having "seven or eight children" as the main issue that is hampering development in African nations (theindependent.co.uk, 2017). In every part of the Western world the cultures of the "global majority" (Rosemary Campbell, *Education and the Global Majority*) were systematically underdeveloped, deemed primitive and even inconsequential when compared to the culture and achievements of Western civilisation.

This fact has been totally ignored by the Western curriculum, maybe out of ignorance and perhaps fear of the reprisal that could result from students learning the truth about the British empire and the human costs, which was quite extensive. But what you must keep in mind here is the deliberate obfuscation of cultural patrimony by the Western educational system in undermining African historicity and its contribution to the greatness of Europe and the world at large in the twenty-first century and how this acknowledgement would bolster the achievement and self-confidence of African American and African Caribbean students. Would this knowledge of self-reduce the attractiveness of gang culture in the hearts and minds of Black boys? Would it boost attainment? What would it do for the attitude and self-image of Black girls?

Indeed, we can no longer ignore the empowering rewards that this truth regarding Africa's greatness and accomplishments will afford Black individuals who need to heal from the tragic and traumatic events, which are colonialism and displacement. What is not said at universities or in governments is the very idea that young people must have full access to their cultural patrimony to fully realise themselves as human beings and to achieve their full potential. This is a human right that we must not continue to ignore.

Now, let's take this a step further. Imagine a system that not only denies young people access to their cultural heritage but also reduces their entire educational experience to a single number: a test score. This is the Western tradition of obsessive grading—a system that has shifted the focus from holistic, meaningful learning to a narrow, prescriptivist approach that values grades over potential. What happens when you strip education of its cultural and emotional dimensions? What happens when you prioritise high-stakes assessments over the development of the whole child? The answer is simple: you lose something essential. You lose the ability to cultivate curiosity, creativity, and a sense of self. And in doing so, you fail the very people you're supposed to serve.

This book is an argument—a call to rethink what education can and should be. It's a challenge to move beyond the orthodoxy of test scores and summative assessments and to embrace a vision of learning that is as rich with creativity, diverse, and dynamic as the students it seeks to empower. Because the truth is, education isn't just about passing exams. It's about passing on the tools, stories, and truths that allow us to become who we are meant to be—to become the creators of a more tolerant and humane society.

As an educator with roughly thirty years of teaching experience in the UK and the US, I have had the opportunity to work with students from various cultural backgrounds. During this time, I have witnessed firsthand the detrimental effects of high stakes testing and grading on both students and teachers. This form of testing no doubt began with the advent of the Industrial Revolution in England, a time of exploitation and apathy among the elite of society when the "factory model of education" was established to coincide with the growing demands for a more literate workforce. Although quantitative testing serves to quantify numerically the amount of information that the student can regurgitate, it does not assess their moral compass, challenge their prejudices, social competency, or their self-worth.

Over the years, the focus on grades has become increasingly acceptable in our education systems, with teachers and students alike under extreme pressure to produce higher grades and higher results on exams to prove that they have what it takes to enter the realms of higher education. Whilst academic achievement is undoubtedly essential, it's not the only measure of success, and I believe that our emphasis on grades has come at a significant cost. Through my experience in the classroom, I have seen how high stakes testing and

grading can create a culture of competitiveness, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and stress, leaving little room for the exploration of creativity and individuality that an academic environment is supposed to create and nurture in children. I have also observed how this pressure can disproportionately affect students from marginalised cultures, who may already feel persecuted within the educational system.

Therefore, it is my sincerest desire that in this book, *It's Not Just About Grades, It's About Culture*, we can explore these issues and provide a thoughtful analysis of the impact of high stakes testing and grading on our children. I also hope to offer some practical strategies for educators, Black parents, and students to help navigate these challenges to create a more balanced approach to learning. By sharing my own teaching practices, experiences and my observations regarding the inequalities within the curriculum, I hope to spark a conversation and debate about the importance of valuing cultural diversity and individuality in our education systems. Ultimately, my goal is to help create a more compassionate and inclusive approach to education that prioritises the whole student, not just their grades. My analysis is that grades are not a true reflection of students' abilities and does not look at the whole person but instead judge the individual based on their results. Numerous studies indicate that grades do not reliably predict future success.

You are led to believe that "grades" are more critical than cultural competency. You are led to believe that "grades" are more critical than self-knowledge. You are led to believe that "grades" will empower your child and make them well-rounded successful individuals. You are led to believe that getting good "grades" determines the future of your child. You are led to believe that grades demonstrate how smart your child is and is a fair indication of their intelligence. It is as if grades mean more than self-awareness, more than who you are and what you will become.

All over the known world, in countries where students produce high results such as in China, India, Japan, the UK, the US, Canada, Nigeria, Ghana and some islands in the Caribbean, "good grades" have become tyrannical demigods that govern the masses of parents and children, who determine their happiness and future prospects on achieving the elusive results that will grant boons and opportunities that will make their lives easier and less painful. The system of grading individuals' performance is widespread, and it is said that

the current class system in England is no longer based on class and nobility but has now evolved into a meritocracy where people are judged by their skills and intellectual achievements (primarily driven by grades).

Arguments against grading demonstrate that "grades distract from the joy of learning. They reduce what should be complex responses to challenging intellectual problems to right or wrong, or perhaps half-right or half-wrong. Grades are reductive symbols and a shortcut around the hard work of responding individually to students' work, celebrating what they have achieved, and explaining to each student how his or her work can continue to progress and develop." I mean, the grading system is so pervasive and brutal that it severely impacts on the mental wellbeing of children and adults.

In Japan, the suicide rates among young people not achieving their desired grades on exams are ever climbing as the prospect of failing is seen as disastrous, to say the least. Grades are used as the dividing line that is drawn between the successful and the unsuccessful—the haves and the have-nots. It is a wild and crazy affair that is fuelled by capitalism and an increasingly materialistic world that is bent on rating everything on a scale of 1–10. We have the Western engine of the factory model of education to thank for this obsession with grades.

I believe the grading system supports white supremacy, the ideology of genetic superiority, and the superficial hierarchy of ranking ethnicities by levels of intelligence (i.e., the Bell Curve). The school system the colonial masters created was not intended to bring about self-awareness, rather, it was designed to remove the language, culture and history of colonised peoples and to remake them in the image of their colonial masters.