REPRESENTATION MATTERS

Becoming an anti-racist educator



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BLOOMSBURY

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'Love is an action, never simply a feeling.' bell hooks

In honour of the late bell hooks I want to acknowledge the sentiment that is quoted here. Love is an action. The work to include and create a sense of belonging isn't just about making changes; it is doing something beyond intention, something that impacts the lives of the othered. The work should be rooted in kindness and love and centred around understanding ourselves and how our actions impact the world around us.

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To my ancestors who endured so much so that I could be, thank you. I hope I have made you proud.

To my friends and family, thank you for putting up with me as I have written this book. Being dyslexic meant that this book was no easy feat, yet you were patient and kind.

To my faith, I give thanks and praise to the almighty. There have been moments when I didn't think I could do it and you have given me the strength to pull through.

To Raekwon, Larenz, Talia and Taite, Aunty is doing all she can to make a better pathway for you.

To my boys, Tacari and Avishae, thank you for being my reason and my inspiration. Everything I do is for you. Mummy loves you.

*

This book has been written for every educator who has the responsibility, privilege and opportunity to change a life.

This book is for every child who has grown up in a society where they have had to question their worthiness because of the colour of their skin.

#RepresentationMatters

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To everyone reading, thank you for taking this journey with me. It is not always easy to hold up the mirror and make change. But it is the only way that we will dismantle the current systems of oppression.

With love and light,
Aisha x

Introduction

I started writing this book in 2019 as a 35-year-old assistant principal; the world was different back then (it feels like it was a decade ago!). It was before the Covid-19 pandemic and before the resurgence of race relations in the UK. This book has taken me on a journey, and I am not the woman who started writing just a few short years ago. I have always been passionate about inclusion and diversity work; it is the natural activist in me. I wanted to be heard, seen and included. I identify as Black British; my heritage is Jamaican. Following my mum's ancestry, I think we originate from West Africa, primarily Nigeria. It is all I know at the moment, as I couldn't trace further back than my great-great-grandparents. Enslavement erased the rest of it.

Representation Matters: Becoming an anti-racist educator was never a book I planned to write. However, the more I embarked upon my mission to challenge the education system with regards to its racial inequalities, the more I became aware of the lack of resources available to educators who wanted to challenge themselves both personally and professionally. I read leadership book after leadership book… no mention of race. I read books on teaching standards… again, no mention of race. I read books about pedagogy, behaviour, teaching and learning, yet struggled to find many books that spoke about race. So, how does a teacher, trainee, teaching assistant, pastoral support worker or school leader embark on this journey?

I see this book as an opportunity to amplify the voices of the marginalised and ensure that their authentic lived experiences are told. They are the most affected by the systemic racism that exists in our education system today. Yet they continue to be silenced and gaslighted. Listening to their experiences is as good a starting point as any for all educators wanting to rethink representation.

My journey to rethinking representation

There are a million ways in which I could have started this book. In the end I decided to start at the very beginning: why representation matters to me and how it has affected my journey in education. However, to understand my world view, I need to go back to the source, the root of my experience. My understanding of representation starts with my foundations: my upbringing, and the funds of

knowledge and the parental capital that I was blessed with. It has also been shaped by the experiences I have had as a professional.

This book is named after my company, Representation Matters Ltd©, which was launched in July 2020. While the company may be relatively new, the work isn't. It started a decade earlier, when a young man in prison challenged me to rethink representation.

Before transitioning into education, I had a brief career in law. I read law at university and then worked as a legal assistant for a few years before being offered a training contract to become a solicitor. Whilst working as a legal assistant in a Bristol law firm, I became a volunteer peer mentor for the Prince's Trust. The project I supported was called the National Offender Management Scheme (NOMS) and its purpose was to help young men back into the community following a period in prison. This was an emotional experience. I had always been aware of the disproportionate numbers of Black and Brown children and young people in prison. However, this was the first time that I had seen the physical manifestation of these statistics. I felt an overwhelming sense of responsibility and I wanted to do all I could to make a difference.

There was a particular moment in time that is still very vivid in my memory. I was being escorted from one side of the prison yard to the meeting room for my session. I found myself in the middle of a 'mass move'. A 'mass move' is when all prisoners are moved to various locations across the site. Before I knew it, I was surrounded by a sea of faces. I was scared; I was overwhelmed. But what struck me the most was that I was surrounded by Black and Brown young men. I couldn't help questioning how this could be. Why were there so many? What was happening to our Black and Brown children and young people?

After the 'mass move', I went to meet one of my mentees. During our conversation about the future and next steps, he said to me that perhaps if I had been his teacher, he wouldn't be in prison today. He didn't mean literally me, but what it represented to see a Black person in power, a decision-maker. What a difference that could have made to this young person, and many others like him, who just longed to see himself in a different role.

He then talked about representation and explained that all the people in power are White. He talked about only seeing himself in sport, media and crime. I look back on this moment and I realise it was a catalyst for change. I didn't want to be part of the system that would see him go to prison. Instead, I wanted to be part of a system that could prevent young people like him from following this pathway in the first place. I had to get the young people at an earlier point. So, what better career than education? This is where my journey began.

What you will find in this book

Ultimately, I want this book to be a beacon of truth; one which heralds a new reality. My hope is that it will help those who want to start their own journey, those who misunderstand why representation in education is important and those who want to bring about true, lasting change. The book has been written with all educators in mind, from early career teachers to experienced teachers and school leaders. It is essential to note that most of the content in this book was formulated pre-2020, before the pandemic and before the death of George Floyd. I was a serving assistant principal, leading on high-level behaviour needs, safeguarding and school culture. This book is not a reaction to recent events for me or for the educators who have contributed their words. It is a response to a lifelong experience. I write through the lens of my authentic lived experience as a Black woman. I am dyslexic and was diagnosed at the age of 21, which also forms part of my intersectional lens.

Just like me, your world view, your understanding of the world and your understanding of representation will have been shaped by your personal experiences from early childhood through to adolescence and adulthood, as well as your professional experiences as an educator. This is why I advocate that real change comes from within. It starts with deep self-reflection and honesty. You need to understand your starting point as an individual – what representation means to you and why – before you can begin to implement change as an educator. I often talk about the concept of triple consciousness. As educators, we have three aspects to our selves that each interact with one another throughout our lives and professional careers:

1. The person you are at home.
2. The person you are at work.
3. The person you are expected to be in education.

As educators, it is important that we take time to think about who we are at home. This will impact on what we do, what we say and how we show up in the classroom. It will also impact on our journey towards inclusive and anti-racist practices in school and how much of this we choose to implement. But most importantly, it will impact on how we engage with children and young people. How often have you let your beliefs impact your behaviour in the classroom, the corridor or the playground?

It would be so much easier if in this book I could just provide you with a tick sheet of all the things that a school could do to become inclusive, to become diverse

and to be anti-racist. But the reality is that it takes time, effort and commitment. Grand initiatives, black squares, flags and heritage month celebrations will only do so much. Instead of offering a checklist, I therefore want this book to guide you through a process towards transformation. This is not a step-by-step handbook of actions to undertake, but a series of self-reflection questions, activities, discussion points for staff meetings, support, coaching and guidance to help you begin your journey and set you on a path of deeper reflection and positive change as an individual, an educator and a school community. Work through the activities and questions, taking time to reflect and make notes, and explore the discussion points with colleagues in meetings and training sessions. In each chapter, I will also share some of the experiences of my fellow comrades, all of whom have volunteered their time and energy, and re-lived their trauma, to ensure that we can do better for the children we serve.

This book should put you in a space of deep reflection, enabling you to hold up a mirror to yourself to think about who you are as an individual and who you are as an educator. This is not supposed to be an easy journey. It requires bravery and dedication, and if you are working through this process as a department or whole school, a culture of psychological safety is paramount.

A note about language

The ability to racialise me and describe myself has always been a point of contention. I apologise to any Black person or Person of Colour who is triggered by the experiences or the terms I am about to share. When I was younger, I experienced anti-Blackness and was referred to as a 'coconut' on more than one occasion. Black on the outside and White on the inside. When I attended my majority-White secondary school, I was too Black for the people there. Yet when I returned to my local area, which was very diverse, some people in my community felt I was too *White* for them. This, coupled with my skin tone, was very confusing for me. I felt I had to code-switch as I got on and off the school bus.

My skin complexion has played a part in this and I have been referred to as 'browning', 'lighty' and 'redskin'. These are just some of the terms I can reference here. There were also many others that I will not name, but I will say that when I also had straight, relaxed hair, it was common for me to be asked if I was mixed or if I had any Indian heritage. When working at one particular educational establishment, a member of staff challenged me for

calling myself Black and said that she would call me 'latte'. I wasn't proper Black. So, I question what this means for me.

I am of Jamaican heritage; however, I have never lived in Jamaica and neither have my parents. Yet my Jamaican heritage has had such an impact on my life. I identify as Black British, but that is also only part of my identity. Whilst Africa is my roots, that has been erased and I have been stripped of that part of my identity. I have no idea where my family would have originated from before they were enslaved.

I have been challenged many times about language and some have said don't use Black while others say do use Black. Some have said to refer to myself as Jamaican, Caribbean and African. Some have said race is a social construct and isn't real, so I should identify by my ethnicity. We now have many terms: People of Colour, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour), Black and Brown people, Political Blackness, Global Majority and Melanin Rich. All have nuances and complexities, and each person who is a part of these communities will have their own preferences about which terms to use to describe themselves and the people around them. Personally, I identify as a Black woman and choose to racially identify in that way.

In this book, I will use the terms Black, Brown, racially minoritised and People of Colour. I appreciate that not everyone will choose to identify in these ways and I respect the individual choices of the reader. The terms Black, Brown and White have been capitalised throughout the book to refer to race, ethnicity and culture. For more on this, read Chapter 5 of Blair Imani's book *Read This to Get Smarter* (2021). Please note that the writers who have contributed lived experience pieces are using the terms they feel most comfortable with, so other language will appear in some of the chapters. In addition, research papers and data sources often use BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) or BME (Black and minority ethnic). These terms will therefore be reproduced in certain places in the book in order to capture the data as accurately as possible.

The transformation process

So, what does the transformation process I hope to guide you through look like? I have broken it up into three distinct parts, which form a framework for the chapters in this book:

1. Reflecting and reviewing
2. Listening and decentring
3. Creating an action plan

Let's look at each of these in more detail.

Reflecting and reviewing

As mentioned, the first step when beginning this work is to start with *you*. Think about who you are, your core beliefs and values, where you grew up, where your knowledge base has come from and what your influences have been throughout your life. **Chapter 1** explores this process of self-reflection in more detail.

Another step at this initial stage is to review and audit all aspects of your practice and your department or school as a whole (if you are doing this work at a departmental or whole-school level). This will include curriculum, staffing, data, physical environment, policies, processes, website and the work of the children and young people. You want to take a deep dive into your school and hold the lens of race in front of you. Use data which is both qualitative and quantitative. Facts and numbers will provide a base line and foundational starting point which you can use to measure progress. The voices of your pupils and your school community will provide authentic lived experience. **Chapter 2** will support you in this process.

Listening and decentring

Seeking feedback from pupils and the wider school community is not only a crucial part of the data gathering you undertake but also a vital element in your own reflective journey. A real sense of community will come from listening to the voices of those you serve. You will learn so much from the children and young people in your school. We often assume that we, as educators, are teaching them. However, their lived experiences can teach us. We must also be aware of the generational gap. Our lived experiences can often be very different to those of the pupils we serve today. The accessibility of the internet and social media has transformed the way in which children and young people are learning. Even when we are not ready to have the conversation, they are. We need to be prepared to listen and understand.

Listening to your whole school community, children and young people, governors, staff, parents and carers, and partner schools will not only create a sense of connection, but it will also provide a deeper understanding of the temperature of your school community. Pay close attention to what is

highlighted and what is not referenced. It may be telling you a story that you have not noticed before. **Chapters 3 and 4** will consider in more detail how we talk to students about race and at what age we should start talking to children about race and racism.

Listening to the voices of the children in your school will shape your perspectives and support you in thinking about race and representation through a new lens. As part of this process, we will consider how we can move away from centring Whiteness, thinking again about the language we use when we talk about race (**Chapter 5**) and the importance of children having a diverse range of adult role models in their lives (**Chapter 6**).

The titles of Chapters 1 to 6 each pose a 'big question' to support the process of self-reflection in these initial two stages of the transformation process. Before you start to read each chapter, take a moment to reflect on how you would answer the big question being posed. Jot down your initial response to the question. After you have read the chapter, revisit your response and think about whether you would now answer the question in a different way or if there is anything you would add or take away.

Creating an action plan

It is important that you have a clear strategy and plan of action for the work you wish to undertake. Be clear and intentional about your priorities and how you will carry out your work. You want to ensure that the vision is shared and that the why is clear. We often want to jump to the how, as that is where the work takes place. But what you will do and why you will do it are just as important. The action plan shouldn't be an add-on; it should be woven into the school's culture. Using your values and misson to develop an ethos that's inclusive will help to embed the practice.

An action plan will include what steps you will take, your success criteria, milestones, staff responsibilities and resources required. Reflect on the following questions and use them to structure a written strategy document:

- Who is leading on the work strategically and operationally?
- Where are your champions?
- Who will be your critical friend?
- Whose voices are being heard?

- What are your priorities?
- At what level is the work being done?
- How will you hold yourself to account?
- How will you evidence your journey?
- Where will you obtain support?
- What budget and resource will you provide?
- If a Black person or Person of Colour is leading on the work, how are you protecting them?
- Is the work embedded throughout the school or is the focus only on the curriculum?
- What structures will you put in place to allow for challenge?
- Where is the operational work happening?
- Is the work embedded in your overall plans for your school?

The third section of this book will cover some important areas for you to examine and consider as part of your action plan, from the legal framework (**Chapter 7**) to implementing inclusive practice (**Chapter 9**), challenging overt and covert racism (**Chapter 10**), decolonising the curriculum (**Chapter 11**), PSHE (**Chapter 12**) and working with parents and caregivers (**Chapter 13**).

A core part of the action plan is teacher training (**Chapter 8**). Ensure that all staff (including you) have adequate resources and training to deliver and achieve your action plan and fulfil your strategy. It is important for all staff to have a baseline understanding of, for example, the Equality Act 2010, bias in education and key terminology and shared language regarding inclusion, anti-discrimination and anti-racist practice. Too often staff are given one-off or annual training that is never put into practice. Allow space for different styles of learning. Training could be offered through:

- external sessions
- internal sessions
- reading
- podcasts
- articles
- videos
- conferences

- conversation circles
- TeachMeets
- curriculum challenge and planning sessions.

Remember to analyse how effective this training is. How are teachers putting CPD into practice? What steps are they taking? How are you measuring impact? What changes are you seeing in your students?

As you are implementing your action plan, take the necessary steps to review the impact of what you are doing. Ensure that the team of staff and children who are supporting the journey are a part of this process. Take a moment to pause, reflect and track the work that has taken place. Talk to marginalised groups to temperature check change and consider any areas where further work is needed. Review your progress, critique the evidence and don't be afraid to pivot if necessary. Your action plan is a breathing document and should be treated as such. Ensure you have identified key staff to evaluate progress and hold the work to account. It's important that this isn't the same person who is responsible operationally. Clearly defined roles are key.

As you work through the transformation process, think about how you will ensure that the work you are doing lasts. This is our legacy: the seeds that we sow today to reap tomorrow. Work of this nature takes time and there is no finish line. Instead you need stamina to keep going. Putting in place a strong framework will ensure the work is embedded and ever evolving, but how do you create sustainable change that will continue for generations to come? What methodology will you choose? Is it championing curriculum change, conducting annual reviews, or holding regular student voice sessions? Targets, equality impact assessment and tailored lesson observations can help. Some settings may also want to achieve charter marks and awards to recognise and acknowledge their success. Whatever you decide, ensure that the work is the golden thread in your practice and in your school. Create that energy, so whoever walks into your building feels a sense of connection, belonging and pride. It is time to take a stand and stop being complicit in tokenistic gestures, pointless policy-writing and annual tick-box training. It is time for true, lasting change. We owe it to ourselves and we owe it to future generations. So let us begin.