



TACKLING RACIAL BIAS

PROFILE



Lisa Panford

Lisa is a Teacher of Spanish and Lead Practitioner at Greenford High School in West London and a Lecturer on the PGCE Secondary MFL course at St Mary's University, Twickenham.

In the 1990s I was the only black pupil who opted to study two languages at GCSE in my year group, and then again at A-Level, at the large inner London secondary school which I attended.

In the early 2000s I was the only black student in my year at London's largest University studying a 'straight' languages degree.

In the late 2000s I was one of only two black students training to be a secondary school teacher of languages at the largest Initial Teacher Training provider in London, although it is of exceptional note that one of our University tutors was also black.

In the past 14 years, I have been the only black MFL teacher in the two large London secondary schools in which I have taught, in spite of the schools being situated in the top 10 most ethnically 'diverse' boroughs in the UK and both having a 'BAME' majority student population.

In the past decade I have participated in multiple networking opportunities and met hundreds of MFL colleagues and yet, in the entirety of my career to date, I have encountered fewer black MFL teachers than I can count on both hands. I am at present the only black lecturer on the PGCE secondary course programme at a large ITT provider in London and in my last cohort of MFL trainee teachers, only one was black.

I have regularly been told that I 'don't look like a languages teacher' and have generally understood this seemingly innocuous observation to be about my race; my gender and age reflect the characteristics of an average secondary school teacher whereas the colour of my skin does not. Why should such a conventional trajectory from pupil of MFL to teacher of MFL be so exceptional when you take into account the colour of my skin? And does this actually matter anyway?

I have personally benefited from wide-ranging and international opportunities as a result of studying languages: I was inspired as a child at school by my Spanish teacher, nurtured by my lecturers at university, personally and professionally supported, encouraged (and promoted) by brilliant MFL colleagues at the school and university in which I teach. They, like many others in our profession, are wonderful individuals who are fully committed to the notions of diversity and inclusion which underpin current pedagogical practices. But I note too that they have all been white. I look at my own experiences as a pupil and teacher of MFL (as well as those of my colleagues) within the institutional and structural systems in which we operate, and find that various policy and

curriculum decisions have conspired effectively to provide barriers for many other people who look like me to 'see themselves' within our subject. Until we, our MFL community of researchers, curriculum designers and classroom practitioners 'see' colour, I fear that my exceptionally unexceptional trajectory may remain ... exceptional!

Seeing 'race' in MFL

There has until now been a 'colour-blind' approach to pedagogy and policy in MFL, as evidenced by the gaping absence of research which centralises the notion of race in any issues concerning our subject. While the gender and socio-economic attainment gaps in MFL have been repeatedly researched, and are closely monitored and analysed annually in e.g. the Language Trends Survey, ethnicity is never mentioned. Another gap in data relates to the number of teachers of colour who are currently teaching MFL. While the shortage of so called 'BAME' teachers across the whole teaching workforce is a matter of public record we have no reliable statistics to tell us exactly how many 'BAME' MFL teachers there are. This means that I have little more than the firm *belief*, based on over a decade of experience in the sector, that the shortage of teachers of colour is even more pronounced in MFL than it is in other subjects. Whilst I acknowledge the limitations of a 'colour-only' approach to understanding any issue because of the multiple interactions between race, gender, class, religion, faith, disability, poverty, sexuality, age and so on, my present concern is with drawing attention to an area which remains entirely unexplored in MFL. My conviction is that, in continuing to ignore race in the data and research about MFL, we show what looks like a complete lack of interest in teachers and pupils of colour.

Decolonising the MFL curriculum

In recent months following the killing of George Floyd and issues raised by the Black Lives Matter movement, History teachers and their curricula were thrown into the spotlight; the History National Curriculum was widely criticised for systematically omitting the contribution of black British history in favour of a dominant white and Eurocentric curriculum, and there were widespread calls for the decolonisation of a subject content which ostracises black and minority ethnic students. Issues in the History Curriculum are mirrored in our own - I recall that, some 20 years ago, aged 16, having studied French and Spanish at secondary school for five years and gained good GCSE grades in both, I had, at best, a sketchy comprehension of *la Francophonie* or *el mundo hispanohablante* and the people who live there, and the utterly ludicrous impression that I was a fairly unique speciality as a black speaker of French and Spanish! Analysis of the current MFL curricula leads me to believe that this misconception may well endure in many of our pupils today, because in the context of teaching and learning, driven by the outcomes presented in the GCSE / A Level subject criteria, the rich socio-cultural, historical and political dimensions of our subject still remain largely undeveloped. The colonial underpinnings and legacies of our Target Language countries remain unexplored; Eurocentric cultural examples are favoured; European literary texts are centred, and black narratives remain virtually non-existent, or where they are present, consigned to the topic areas of festivals and immigration.

The failings of the current curriculum provision to include narratives beyond a white Eurocentric core, our invisibility in the data and the academic silence on the issue of race in the context of MFL compound the daily consuming presence of racism experienced by teachers and pupils of colour in our education system. Many of my colleagues, like me, find the most compelling aspect of teaching MFL in its potential to transform; its ability to enrich young peoples' lives beyond their own possibly very limited experience, and to provide a

window to the world. The focus of the OFSTED Framework on how schools make their planning relevant to the local community should surely encourage whole school debate on these issues in our cities at least, and perhaps the DfE Review of GCSE content is now an opportunity to raise them in the context of exams also. If we truly want all of our pupils to see our subject's transformative potential, as well as their own within it, we must first 'see' all of them.

Next steps

Below I offer some suggestions of how teachers can approach anti-racist practices in the MFL classroom:

Review our curricula

The following questions may be helpful for reviewing current provision :

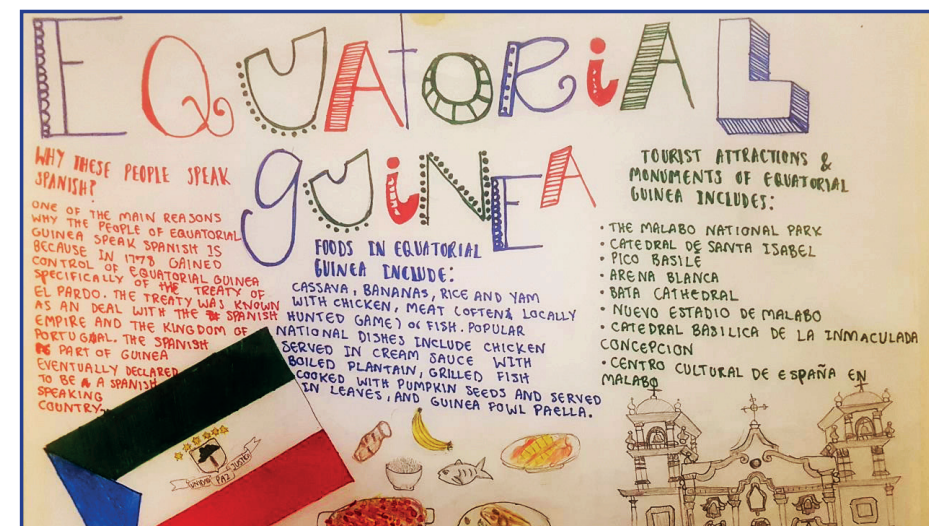
1. How far is critical thinking about race/ethnicity present in our curriculum?
2. How far do our materials (e.g. textbooks) promote voices, perspectives, works and ideas that come from beyond a 'white'/'Eurocentric' core?
3. How far do our classroom displays/visual aids include images that reflect role models who are people of colour?

Work on our own racial literacy

While some people may feel uncomfortable talking about race or ethnicity because of worry about causing offence, we all have an ethnicity, and so we should look for ways to discuss it which are appropriate and sensitive to how ethnic groups choose to identify themselves. Engaging with recent research (e.g. The Runnymede Trust Report - below) can better inform our understanding around issues of race and racism in the school context, while contemporary books on race in Britain by popular authors such as Afua Hirsch, Akala and Reni Eddo Lodge will provide broader context and insight.

Connect with colleagues

Collaboration with colleagues (within departments; across different subject areas; through ALL Local and other networks and on social media - for example the 'Decolonising MFL group' below) is key to making meaningful progress in this area. This is because working together invigorates our practice and generates the strongest work, and also because moving together is our most powerful tool in influencing policy decisions positively and shaping curriculum design, so that our subject is better aligned to a shared purpose in terms of anti-racism, diversity and inclusion.



Trainees at St Mary's University share examples of lessons/resources/displays which promote diversity and inclusion

Runnymede Trust June 2020

<https://www.runnymedetrust.org/projects-and-publications/education/racism-in-secondary-schools.html>

'Decolonising MFL group' at <https://chat.whatsapp.com/EThZMb413Zm2uuNQ6r0XIC>

and Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/942528242897003/?ref=share>

In collaboration with Melina Irvine, a teacher at St Bernadette's school in Bristol, Lisa has drafted a framework for a decolonised, anti-racist approach to MFL (including practical suggestions) and they have shared their work in progress with the current PGCE MFL cohort at St Mary's University. Trainees are working in their placement schools on developing lessons/resources/displays which promote diversity/inclusion as a result. Lisa and Melina will share this collaborative work with LT readers later in the year.