"Zero Tolerance" of Black Autistic Boys: Are schools failing to recognise the needs of African Caribbean Boys with a diagnosis of autism?

I am a Black[1] parent of two Black autistic children of African-Caribbean heritage (Bains) attending mainstream schools. I am also an art psychotherapist working with autistic students in a mainstream inner city school that serves a predominantly black and minority ethnic community.

Two years ago my son was permanently excluded from his secondary school because of his behaviour, behaviour I suspected arose from his undiagnosed autism. However, the school insisted that my son was defiant, disobedient and unwilling to follow school rules. Because the school believed his behaviour was chosen they refused my requests for an educational psychology assessment. According to the Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice (Dept of Ed 2014) this assessment should have been initiated because of his long record of disruptive behaviour.

To justify the permanent exclusion they carried out a risk assessment, characterising my son in stereotypical ways e.g. potential risks of involvement in gangs, substance misuse, carrying a weapon and violence to others. None of these claims were substantiated. This was the first indication we had that my son was being subjected to a form of racial profiling.

Ultimately though, we successfully challenged the school and the local authority, the decision was overturned and my son returned to his school after fifteen months, with an autism diagnosis and with appropriate support. It is this experience that led to my research into the experience of Black boys with an autism spectrum disorder diagnosis and how racism, micro-aggressions of racism, and ableism[2] intersect and damage the life chances of Black autistic boys in the UK.

In the report, ironically titled, 'They Never Give Up on You' – The Office of the Children's Commissioner, School Exclusion Inquiry (2012), identified:

> *'A black Caribbean boy eligible for free school meals who also has special educational needs (SEN) is 168 times more likely to be permanently excluded than a white British girl without SEN and not eligible for free school meals'.*

This claim recognises the compounding impact of discrimination known as intersectionality. Crenshaw (1989) first coined the term when describing the specific issues for Black women facing racial and sex discrimination in employment. She described the failure of the court to recognise how racial discrimination and sex discrimination intersect and affect Black women. She gives this example:

> *'Consider an analogy to traffic in an inter-section, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one*

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[1] Black the term has taken on more political connotations with the rise of black activism in the USA since the 1960's and now its usage implies solidarity against racism. The idea of 'black' has thus been reclaimed as a source of pride and identity (Bains R)

[2] For the purpose of this article the term Ableism is: '…the discrimination or dehumanisation of a disabled person. The ableist societal world-view is that neurotypical or able-bodied people are the norm in society and therefore essential and fully human. In contrast, people who have diversities or disabilities are largely seen as invisible 'others', in a diminished state of being human…' (Identity-First Autistic, 2016)

direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination' (1989, p.149).

and in a later article concluded:

"When it comes to thinking about how inequalities persist, categories like gender, race and class are best understood as overlapping and mutually constitutive rather than isolated and distinct" (Crenshaw, 2016).

In this article I intend to raise awareness about the complexities of racism and the intersection with ableism and how this links to the high rates of schools exclusions for African Caribbean boys.

Introduction

My dad arrived in England from Jamaica in 1955. At the time, because Jamaica was a colony of the British Empire he was a British citizen. He came because after World War Two Britain was short of workers and needed to rebuild its economy (McDowell, 2018). Men and women were invited to Britain from the Caribbean to work in manufacturing, public transport and the NHS. However, the welcome was conditional and it was commonplace to see racist notices in homes and businesses saying *'No Blacks no Irish and no dogs'* (Verma 2018). The recent Windrush scandal, reported by the Guardian newspaper in 2019, has demonstrated yet again how racism and the hostile climate continues to affect African Caribbean. Black British citizens who are descendants of my dad's generation continue to face disproportionate disadvantage in all aspects of their lives.

Before I had children I was a community activist challenging racism and institutional practices that undermined the rights of Black people. I had long experience of supporting Black people who had faced racism in school, employment, housing, the criminal justice and health care systems. As a Black woman and activist, 'institutional racism' as a concept was not new to me.

After the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993, Doreen Lawrence's tireless campaign to bring his killer to justice led to the MacPherson Inquiry (1999). This Inquiry exposed the racist attitudes and practices of the police when investigating a racially motivated murder. The inquiry found that institutional racism was present within institutions that govern all aspects of life in Britain:

> *For the purposes of our Inquiry the concept of institutional racism which we apply consists of: The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people.*

> *Racism, institutional or otherwise, is not the prerogative of the Police Service. It is clear that other agencies including for example those dealing with housing and education also suffer from the disease. If racism is to be eradicated there must be specific and coordinated action both within the agencies themselves and by society at large, particularly through the educational system, from pre-primary school upwards and onwards (McPherson 1999, Para. 6.34 and 6.54).*

It has now been 20 years since the MacPherson (1999) inquiry. Has anything changed?

Challenging Institutional Racism in the School and Health systems

I now want to critically reflect on how racism impacts Black autistic boys accessing health and education services. I had long suspected that my son was autistic. From a young age he found unfamiliar social situations stressful, he had difficulties with change in routine and struggled with eye contact. His behaviour in primary school suggested that he wasn't coping with the school environment, especially adapting to changes. In secondary school this became more apparent as he had to adapt to a much bigger community with more rules, different subjects in different rooms and new teachers. He was expected to concentrate for longer periods, it was noisier and busier and more attention was paid to following rules and instructions.

My son was the tallest student in his year and made him more noticeable, this meant that teachers had expectations about his emotional maturity. As a consequence by year nine he had a behavioural record that school wanted to act on. The disciplinary process of fixed term exclusions began. The school regarded my son's behaviour as 'chosen' and that his 'defiance' and inability to follow rules contravened the school behaviour policy and required disciplinary action.

Even though I raised concerns that my son may have undiagnosed special educational needs (SEN) the school began the process of permanently excluding him. Throughout this process I continued to assert that my child may have an undiagnosed condition that was impacting on his behaviour, however this was dismissed by the school governors and the local authority appeals panel.

I believe the procedures that led to his permanent exclusion were based on their stereotypes of Black boys. For example the completed risk assessment form they used in their submission characterised my son in the following ways e.g. potential risks of involvement in gangs, drugs, carrying a weapon and violence to others. None of these risks were substantiated or evidenced and instead the risk assessment was used as a tick list of risks to justify permanent exclusion. More importantly, his vulnerabilities were not given equal weight.

I believe my son's sensory sensitivities lay at the root of some of his challenging behaviour. However some of the school staff interpreted his behaviour as 'chosen bad behaviour'. This language and perspective was used repeatedly in descriptions of incidents recorded in his behaviour log. In my experience schools do not regard disruptive behaviour as indicative of an expression of unmet needs. Our experience of the school is supported by findings in the NAS *"Diverse Perspectives" Report*:

> "*Some parents felt that there was an assumption that black boys are badly behaved and more liable to social exclusion. Participants felt that further assumptions are made that families are to blame for bad parenting that causes behaviour*" (2014, p. 8).

As a result he was denied access to an assessment for autism before this irrevocable action was taken. He did not get the support he needed to stay in his school, as he was entitled to under equalities legislation. These attitudes and practices, at all levels of the disciplinary and appeals processes, led to my son being placed in a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU).

Challenging the school's decision to permanently exclude my son has been devastating for my family. As a Black family, in the face of a predominantly white middle class environment, we felt our views and evidence were disregarded and our voice unwelcome. I can certainly identify with the comments made by parents in the NAS "Diverse Perspectives" report (2014):

> *"White families meet white professionals and seem to be on personal terms. We are made to feel like outsiders. - Parent"*

> *"Black parents are often branded as trouble makers. - Parent."* (2014, p18)

Their refusal to accept my concerns about unmet needs was reflected in the experiences of parents highlighted in the National Autism Society (NAS) *"Diverse Perspectives"* Report (2014):

> *"They said that it was hard to convince schools, even following a diagnosis, that autism was the cause of behaviour'* (2014, p.18)

In discussion with my son following the permanent exclusion he told me he wanted to go back to where he belonged, his own school with his friends and sister. We began a long struggle to support his expressed need to return to a familiar environment. This could only be accomplished by seeking acknowledgement that he'd been unlawfully excluded due to unmet needs. We decided to bring a case of disability discrimination to the SEND First Tier Tribunal - HM Courts & Tribunals Service. My family, like most families finding themselves in this situation, did not have any experience of the complex Tribunal process. However, when we sought legal advice and representation from the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), we were advised that representation would not be available as it would be very difficult to prove disability discrimination as my son did not have a formal 'diagnosis'. In order to challenge the schools decision to permanently exclude my child I was told I had to prove at the time the decision he was in fact disabled. In these circumstances I felt I had no option but to seek a psychiatric diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)[3] to substantiate my claim of disability discrimination, (this proved not to be the case).

We persisted and with some guidance from the EHRC and the National Autistic Society, I submitted an appeal against the school and we were granted a hearing at the Special Educational Needs and Disability First Tier Tribunal. At the hearing, for the first time we felt er were listened to with respect and understanding. The Tribunal panel found that it was not necessary for there to be a formal diagnosis for a person to be deemed disabled. For the school the case hinged on the fact that my son did not have a formal diagnosis and they were resistant to the determination of the panel that they should have acted differently. However, at this stage we had also received confirmation of the formal diagnosis that we were able to bring to the attention of the panel. In spite of the school attempting through their legal representatives to prevent the panel from seeing the letter confirming the diagnosis of ASD. At the end of the hearing, in their final submission, the school and their legal representative still pleaded that whatever the outcome of our claim for disability discrimination they opposed his reinstatement. In spite of this, the tribunal found the school to have discriminated again my son on the grounds of disability, and the permanent exclusion was overturned. The tribunal found that because the school had not triggered an assessment of needs, based on my concerns and therefore had failed in their duty under the SEND Code of Practice (2014) and the Equalities Act (2010).

This vindication of our position, resulted in my son returning to the school where he managed to complete his education and to get his GCSE's. Further, the school was

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[3] For the purpose of this article I am using the diagnosis of ASD from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-5 (DSM-5, 2013) criterion which includes: social communication impairments and restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour to include hyper or hypo-activity to sensory input a 'sub heading' of descriptors within restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviour.

required to apologise for their actions and for staff to undertake training in disability discrimination and autism awareness.

It is important to note that the lack of a formal diagnosis, the point the school saw as most important to their case, proved not to be the reason for the school being found to be in breach of equalities legislation. It was enough that they did not appreciate that his behaviours were in themselves indicative of unmet needs and should have been recognised and responded to.

Because of the experience I described above, I decided it wasn't enough to just fight back, this difficult and challenging experience motivated me to complete a Post Graduate Certificate in Education in Autism and Asperger's Syndrome at Sheffield Hallam University. Here, I began to explore and investigate the intersectionality of racism and ableism in relationship to autism (Annamma S.A., Ferri B.A., Conner D.J 2108). I read the findings of *"They Never Give Up on You"* Report (OCC, 2012) (see above). This report highlights the disproportionate use of permanent exclusion of Black boys especially those receiving free school meals (FSM) with a SEN. They were describing my son's experience and I wanted to know why this had happened to him.

"**Zero Tolerance**" and Exclusion Policies

Schools behaviour policies set out what is expected of students and the sanctions they will face if they break the rules. Exclusions are applied where poor behaviour is persistently disruptive and does not improve. Schools are concerned about increasing levels of verbal and physical aggressive behaviour and the consequent disruption to learning. In response zero tolerance policies to support schools to develop robust behaviour policies were implemented in 2010. This was reinforced in 2014 by Michael Gove's message to teachers to "get tough" on bad behaviour in schools (reported by the Guardian, 2014).

This policy has direct consequences for students with a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and they are now disproportionally represented in school exclusions. This is despite schools being expected to *'consider whether continuing disruptive behaviour might be the result of unmet educational or other needs'* (Dept of Ed 2016, p. 7)

The impact of the "Get tough" message can be seen from these statistics. In 2011/12 the numbers of children with an ASD diagnosis excluded from school was 2,831, by 2015/16 this had risen to 4,485, up by 60% (Hazell W. 2018, Lasota, 2018). It is not clear from these figures how many of these pupils are Black. However, Government statistics for 2018 do show that the rate for permanent exclusions of Black Caribbean pupils was nearly 3 times the rate of White British pupils across the broad ethnic groups (Department for Education 2018). Black and mixed ethnicity pupils had the highest rates of both temporary and permanent exclusions. (EHRC, 2018)

What is becoming clearer, is that these policies have do have direct consequences for young people with an autism diagnosis, however, we don't know the numbers of black boys with an autism diagnosis in the UK and how they may have been affected?

We do know the situation of African Americans. In 2007, a study by a team at the Center for Autism and Developmental Disabilities Research and Epidemiology, University of Pennsylvania, found that African-American children were 5.1 times more likely to be misdiagnosed with conduct disorders before being diagnosed with ASD. This shows that Black children in the UK, as in the USA, may well be under-represented in autism diagnosis and we know they are over-represented in school exclusions.

I now want to consider the long term consequences of the "get tough" policy for African Caribbean boy's mental health and to critique the ideology that underpins the 'get tough' zero tolerance approach.

Evans and Lester (2012) describe zero tolerance as an approach taken from criminal justice systems and they argue that;

> "*Zero tolerance policies often restrict this view of student behaviour and require teachers to follow mandatory policies regarding punishment for certain behaviours. How do teachers manage to honour the **unique needs** of their students while at the same time adhering to uniform school discipline policies?" (2012, p.109).*

Sullivan and Johnson (2016) challenge school responses to behaviour management and state that;

> *"…policy is informed by ideology not evidence'. If zero tolerance approaches are informed by criminal justice practices we know already that African Caribbean communities are disproportionately represented in arrests, stop and search and sentencing. If minsters are using this ideological approach to school discipline the evidence shows that African Caribbean students will undoubtedly be disproportionately affected. According to Eleanor Busby's article in The Independent Education News 2018; reporting from the National Education Union (NEU) conference, teacher believed that zero tolerance approach to bad behaviour amount to child abuse. Teachers attending the conference spoke out saying these polices **'punish Black children and working class children the most'.***

The question then becomes, is this ideology racist? In "*Black Parents Speak Out: The school environment and interplay with wellbeing*" (Ochieng, 2010) her research identified that:

> "*…a number of key factors were viewed as compromising the wellbeing of African Caribbean adolescents in schools; these were identified as experiences of racism, the delivery of a Euro-centric curriculum, and reliance on suspension and exclusion as a form of discipline at school. Participants also believed that because African Caribbean boys suffered worse educational achievements **and the consequences of racism**, this led to a significantly poorer wellbeing in comparison with the girls" (2010, p.176).*

Sensory Differences and Behaviour Policies

I now want to consider the guidance from the Department for Education (2016) on school behaviour policies. In my view, schools in applying the behaviour policies are failing to meet their requirements under the Equality Act 2010. This is because they are not making reasonable adjustments to behaviour policies and the school environment that meet the needs of autistic students. I believe this leads to disproportionate rates of exclusion. The guidance stresses that the policy must be *applied consistently* (Dept. for Ed, 2016). However, the needs of a student with a diagnosis of ASD are not recognised and therefore they are disadvantaged and this causes harm. For instance if a school has a uniform policy that requires that *all* children must wear a tie and blazer, stand in lines and be learning ready. These expectations can present challenges for children with ASD diagnoses whose experiences and reactions may be as a result of their sensory and perceptual differences (such as not being able to tolerate the texture of the fabrics, finding close contact with people in crowded situations and moving classrooms overwhelming). Sensory sensitivities can also cause anxiety, pain, and discomfort which can lead to behaviour that challenges. This is poorly understood by most teaching staff. Beardon argues:

> '*that if we apply a concept that works for people in general and then apply it to the autistic population then the risk of harm goes up*'(Beardon, 2018)

I understand sensory sensitivities and reactions to sensory environmental stimulus, as being at the heart of the difficulties of social communication and cognitive differences experienced by autistic people (Beardon, 2016, Delacato, 1984, and Bogdashina, 2016). An explanation of what is sensory and how it impacts on individual is described by Dellapiazza, Vernheta, Blanc, Miota, Schmidtd, Baghdadlia (2018) who cite Dunn's (1997) model for understanding sensory processing, the sensory experience and the link to behavioural responses:

> "*…the process during which the central nervous system receives, interprets, and responds to sensory inputs. Sensory stimulation can arise from each modality: auditory, tactile, visual, olfactory, vestibular, gustatory, or proprioceptive. Dunn's model takes into account interactions between neurological sensory thresholds and behavioural responses*' (2018, p.78).

In my work I share this perspective with teaching staff through discussions, training and in staff meetings. I share this perspective to combat some of the myths about autism and to encourage staff to think about the environmental stimuli that might have led to behaviour that challenges.

I work with students with an ASD diagnosis, a majority of the students are from black and minority ethnic communities. Students are often referred to me for behaviours that are preventing them from getting the best out of the learning environment (e.g. conflicts with peers or staff, aggression, anxiety and withdrawal from lessons). Behaviour that challenges within school is often experienced as disruptive. However, I argue that behaviour is a form of communication and in my experience, unmet needs are often being expressed. For instance aggressive behaviour can be understood as a reaction to unresolved past issues (Leiberman, 2008); an emotional reaction to conflict (Kaplan 2006); and a symptom of underlying issues (frustration, fear, anxiety, unfair treatment, injustice, pain or discomfort) (Hobson 1985; McKenzie-Mavinga, 2009; Bogdashina, 2016).

Poor behaviour within schools is often framed as an individual transgression of school rules. Hodge (2015) argues against this concept and counters that behaviour that

challenges can be understood in the same way that we think about a social model of disability. Hodge states:

> "*…many teachers are currently operating within an **Individual Model of Behaviour** that always positions the problem of the behaviour in the pupil…this model leads to the application of ineffective and oppressive behavioural strategies*'"(2015, p.1).

I have found this approach helps students, teaching staff and parents to explore behaviour that challenges within the context of sensory sensitivity. This has helped to identify the stressors that led to anxiety, much earlier, reducing the number of incidents. As a parent advocate, sharing my knowledge of my children's sensory sensitives, anxiety and their behaviour has raised the awareness of school staff and led to positive changes in their teaching practice (Beardon 2016, Bogdashina 2016).

Racism, Racial Micro-Aggressions and Anxiety

I want to consider how racism contributes to 'the frustration, fear, anxiety, unfair treatment, injustice, pain or discomfort' (described above) experienced by African Caribbean autistic boys. To begin with Beardon (2017) suggests there is a higher prevalence of anxiety within the autistic adult population as a whole. He states that this could be due to environmental factors, sensory sensitivities, communication differences and masking. Studies have also linked racial discrimination to increased anxiety levels in black populations (Abdullah, Graham, 2016), (Graham, West, Roemer, 2015) citing Breslau et al. (2006) found:

> '…a 24.7% lifetime prevalence rate of anxiety disorders among Black individuals. In addition, a replication of the National Comorbidity Study found anxiety disorders to be more persistent in Black individuals when compared to White individuals' (2015, p.553).

Beardon describes in 'Three Golden Rules for Supporting Autistic Students'

"… practical processes that schools can abide by that ensure the autistic child's needs are met:

> 1. Autism plus the environment equals the outcome. That outcome might be positive or negative, but the person who is autistic remains the same, it is the environment that leads to the outcome. So if you want a successful outcome, and you recognise the person with autism cannot change their brain, then the only thing you can change is the environment. And that often, but not always, means the people within that environment" (Beardon, 2018).

Applying this rule to Black autistic boys is helpful. My children's experience of racism within the school environment has given me cause to consider how their levels of anxiety and responses to perceived racism compounds their stress and behavioural responses.

I now want to consider 'racial micro aggressions' as part of the anxiety creating environment for Black autistic boys. In this context the NAS (2014) report 'Diverse Perspectives', identified teacher's attitudes and perceptions toward Black boy's behaviour as a significant area of concern. Do these attitudes include "racial micro-aggressions"?

Micro-aggressions are factors in the everyday lives of black people and are described as:

> '… verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership. In many cases, these hidden messages may invalidate the group identity or experiential reality of target persons, demean them on a personal or group level, communicate they are lesser human beings, suggest they do not belong with the majority group, threaten and intimidate, or relegate them to inferior status and treatment' (Wing Sue, 2010 par. 2).

The research by Abdullah and Graham (2016) describe anxiety in relation to racism as follows:

> "An individual's perception of control over life contexts, safety is directly linked to stress and anxiety. We are not responsible for our experiences of racism, and we have very little, if any control over whether or not we experience racism. So in the context of racism, racist experiences, can elicit understandable perception of lack of control of one's environment, therefore contributing to the development and maintenance of stress and anxiety" (2016).

Through my own lived experiences and that of my children, racial micro-aggression are experienced every day, tone of voice, facial expressions, use of language and body language are absorbed through the senses. The daily micro-aggressions

described by Wing Sue (2010) lead me to conclude that racism for Black boys is an embodied sensory experience and that this is not generally recognised. As a result they are being disproportionally affected by the stress of the school environment and the wider impact of multiple disadvantage and discrimination.

This is an example of how micro-aggressions in relation to race and disability intersect and compound the impact on the Black autistic student. A student uses their timeout pass regularly, they are often challenged in the corridors by teachers who say, "What YOU up to?" They are not doing anything wrong, however the child is being treated with suspicion. The student "feels" this and experiences it as a slight and reacts to it by saying, "I'm not UP to ANYTHING". In the following discussion with the teacher the student does not maintain eye contact and replies abruptly and this is interpreted as defiant and suspicious behaviour. The anxiety and distress affects the rest of the student's day as they feel it was unfair and bottle it up. In the next section I will consider how can we reduce these negative experiences and how can we increase Black autistic students resilience and positive self-regard to present low self-esteem?

Exploring a Positive Black Autistic Identity

Developing a positive Black autistic identity is integral to my role as a mother of black autistic children, and in my role as a psychotherapist and activist.

A large part of my work and practice is to support Black young people to develop a positive identity that increases a sense of belonging, value and self-worth. As a practitioner working within a Black perspective[4] it is a very important to me to address this challenge in a holistic way (Best J. 2005). This involved continual learning to understand the theories and the systems in relation to autism. This journey has helped me to develop a Black and non-clinical perspective.

Too often Black students do not experience a positive sense of self in the school environment and curriculum. This is especially true in addressing the damaging effects of racism. I have explored and used the *Black Identity Development Model* (Jackson, 1975, 2001) as a means to support the development of a positive Black identity. This model has been further adapted by Atkinson, Morten & Sue (1998) to include a *Minority Identity Development Model* which is useful for working with all autistic young people. By adapting this model to work with Black autistic students I have been able to support young people to explore a positive Black autistic identity.

I prioritised influencing the staff to consider how they could be part of directly increasing the visibility of Black and autistic people. In the school, whilst there are many posters that celebrate the achievements of Black and Minority Ethnic people and other minority groups. The poster that celebrated the achievements of autistic people only represented successful white people, mainly scientists e.g. Marie Curie, Albert Einstein, Steve Jobs etc. I started a discussion about whether it reflected the lives of students in the school. As a result of this discussion, over a year, our awareness was raised and a new inclusive poster was designed of notable people that all young people could relate to. For example:

- Stephen Wiltshire, a Black artist from the UK

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[4] Black perspective "A black perspective recognises the collective capacity of black people to define, develop and advance their own political, economic, social, cultural and educational interests. "Black" provides an historical and cultural context, whilst "perspective" supplies the unique analysis and consciousness-raising tool for action. A black perspective equips black people to continue the fight for self-emancipation and create a body of knowledge, develop strategies that contribute to their intellectual freedom and political liberation.

- Lionel Messi, a talented footballer

- Talia Grant, playing an autistic character in Hollyoakes

- Anne Hegarty of The Chase

The new poster has become a valuable resource that generates discussion about the experience, challenges and successes of the people in the poster. It also encouraged students to find out more about Black autistic people and to have different conversations about their own experience of autism. The display of contemporary media and sports personalities has also been an invaluable resource for working with students to who can see positive Black and autistic role models.

In developing knowledge and resources, I share articles, research and new findings that appeal to students specific interests.

For example:

- Looking at the theory that autism can be traced back to the ice age[5]

- Viewing YouTube videos about autistic people lives has opened up a new conversation with a positive slant about their own understanding and their feelings about themselves as autistic young people. For instance Stephen Wiltshire's videos about the cities that he has visited and the kind of art he makes.

- Black History Month[6] staff have specifically looked for Black people in history who had extraordinary talents and lives like the blind pianist Black Tom Wiggins.

This proved invaluable when students expressed their feelings of isolation, of being called names and not receiving positive messages about their unique differences. Students were shocked when they discovered that there are notable and successful autistic people. I have found by providing students with a range of information opens up opportunities to talk about issues in their life. The issues they bring may well be about stress, low self-esteem, isolation, invisibility and negative stereotypes.

My aim is to counter the widely held belief that challenges encountered by autistic people are the result of having a 'diagnosed disorder" rather than 'difference' (Beardon 2018). I do this by facilitating a process of enabling the students to value and celebrate their 'difference'

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[5] At this time of human evolution, it bis argued that autistic people had important assets; their capacity for focus, heightened sensory awareness, and attention to detail and it is hypotheses that autistic people played an important role in cave painting, food gathering and arrow making; (ref);

[6] Black History Month is an established, nationally recognised observance that honours the lives, experiences and history of Afro-Caribbean people.

Reframing Behaviour that Challenges Through Art Therapy

In my experience the reason the school refers students for art therapy is related to behaviour that challenges. However, the issues that are brought by the students are often about family conflict, belonging and identity issues, self-hatred, low self-esteem, loss and grief, anger, fear and traumatic events.

Art therapy can be a very useful way of supporting the students to communicate their distress about the challenges and difficulties they face in a safe, supportive, non-judgmental and confidential environment.

Art Therapy is a described as a form:

> '… of psychotherapy based on the belief that the creative process in artistic self-expression can help individuals resolve conflicts and problems, develop interpersonal skills, manage behaviour, reduce stress and increase self-esteem. It can be preferable to counselling for those who are unable to verbalise the emotional and mental effects of bereavement, domestic violence, a broken home or identity problems.' (Keating, 2007 par 5)

In my practice, my aim is to work with students, staff and parents to understand behaviours within the context of high levels of anxiety. I use an assessment process to help identify the triggers for anxiety. I then explore with them any relationship between the expression of the anxiety and behaviours that create challenges for them and the school. This approach enables students, parents and teaching staff to reframe behaviours within a context of appreciating the underlying issues facing the student. The relevance of this work to my psychotherapeutic practice is that it helps me to identify the range of factors that may be leading to their anxiety which can lead to behaviour that challenges.

My art therapy practice is responsive and tailored to the needs of autistic students. I use the creative process as described above to explore issues. Where possible I use art materials, however, for a number of my students art materials may trigger anxieties related to touch and tactile sensitivity (Alter-Muri 2017). This is not in itself a barrier because students have the opportunity to talk about what is affecting them about using the materials during the sessions.

Therefore, the art therapy room is a quiet space where students can get support to make sense of their experience through:

- aiming to provide a calm space where students can relax and explore

- providing a range of materials that may stimulate sensory pleasure and/or discomfort (Beardon 2016)

- encouraging discussion about sensory sensitivities to support the student to better understand their own sensory experiences (Brown, Dunn 2010)

- providing a range of multicultural art materials including a range of different skin tone paints, crayons, masks; pictorial representations off diverse communities

The benefits of exploring high level of anxiety and disruptive behaviour using a creative process can be illustrated by work I did with a Muslim student. He was concerned about how I viewed Muslims, stereotypes of Islam, the rise of Islamophobia and how he experienced this through the media. He brought these issues to the therapeutic space and would challenge me. I considered the negative impact this had for his sense

of self and identity and engaged with him by sharing my understanding of multiple disadvantage.

Initially his high levels of anxiety and low self-esteem prevented him from feeling safe in the art therapy room. He often left the room for short periods during the session and this behaviour led to teaching staff questioning if he was using art therapy appropriately. However I persisted and encouraged him to work with materials that he liked. He chose masks that can be decorated and worn. Initially he didn't decorate the masks but used them to hide his face. "Hiding" became an important theme in our work together. He then began decorating the masks and to explore feelings that he couldn't easily express, for instance the way he decorated a mask led to a discussion about sadness and crying. This exploration eventually led to a trusting relationship with me.

This trusting relationship enabled him to share with me his underlying difficulties and links to behaviour that challenged. For example he wanted to have a girlfriend and this was against his families values. This made him angry, especially because of the restrictions place on him as a result of his diagnosis and perceived vulnerability. This resulting inner conflict; his need to be seen to be as a good Muslim; his family values and his lack of opportunities for developing his independence. This led to high levels of anxiety and was connected to his disruptive behaviour in the school. It was important for me to recognise the importance of how inter-sectorial issues of racism, Islamophobia, and ableism impacted on this young man's life. The process supported him to explore his identity as a young Muslim, as an autistic man and to better understand the connection between his emotions and behaviour. By finding a way to explore these difficulties he was better able to acknowledge his distress.

Conclusions

In this article I have examined whether schools are failing to recognise the needs of Black autistic African Caribbean Boys. In doing this, I have sought to explain how racism, micro-aggressions of racism, and ableism[7] intersect and ultimately damage the life chances of Black autistic boys in the UK and leads to high rates of schools exclusions.

The high rates of permanent exclusions of Black boys from mainstream schools coupled with the recent 60% rise in exclusions for autistic students is alarming, but does not specifically reflect the experience of Black autistic boys. This requires further exploration.

Further, when the OCC *They Never Give Up on you Report* (2012) states:

> *'A black Caribbean boy eligible for free school meals who also has special educational needs (SEN) is 168 times more likely to be permanently excluded than a white British girl without SEN and not eligible for free school meals'.*

It is unlikely that this statistic takes into account the experience of Black autistic boys, a particularly vulnerable group that we do not know much about.

The rise in youth offending and the possible links to school exclusions are raising concerns at a governmental level, as can be seen by a recent Home office report that has warned that school expulsions could be fueling a rise in youth crime (The

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[7] For the purpose of this article the term Ableism is: '…the discrimination or dehumanisation of a disabled person. The ableist societal world-view is that neurotypical or able-bodied people are the norm in society and therefore essential and fully human. In contrast, people who have diversities or disabilities are largely seen as invisible 'others', in a diminished state of being human…' (Identity-First Autistic, 2016)

Telegraph 2018). This was certainly a concern I had, by permanently excluding my son from school and isolating him from his peers I felt they put him at greater risk of involvement in crime. My motivation for returning him to mainstream school was both to challenge the discrimination he faced as a Black autistic student and to keep him out of the criminal justice system. I regard permanent exclusion from school for Black autistic boys as a potential *'pipeline to prison'*. Keeney Parks (2018,) a black mother and researcher in the USA shares my concerns. She writes about the day to day lives and experiences of black parents who have a child diagnosed with autism. Her recent online blog identifies similar realties to those I have experienced;

> *'The disparities faced… by African-Americans receiving special education services, which is the case with the majority of autistic children, are especially disconcerting… but even more so for kids in special education, who are often segregated from typical peers into special classes, juvenile justice and criminal justice systems are deprived of an appropriate education that could have changed their School-to-Prison Pipeline trajectory.'*

In the UK context, The Lammy Review (2017) found that:

> *Despite making up just 14% of the population, BAME men and women make up 25% of prisoners, while over 40% of young people in custody are from BAME backgrounds. There is greater disproportionality in the number of Black people in prisons here than in the United States.*

I believe that this a sign that Black autistic boys are in danger of being on the same trajectory as the African Americans in the USA that Parks describes.

A confidential government briefing paper was recently leaked (Guardian, 2019) addressing the concerns arising from their determination to continue with a 'Get Tough' stance on poor behaviour. According to the Guardian the DfE paper:

> *… includes a major focus on poor behaviour in schools, said to be driven by No 10's view that recent polling has shown strong public support for policies taking a tougher line. The announcements will include explicit support for head teachers who use "reasonable force" in their efforts to improve discipline.*

> *… While the DfE expects members of the public will welcome "a harder narrative on discipline", the document warns key stakeholders will be worried the policy could result in increased rates of permanent exclusion, which have in any case been climbing since 2012.*
> *The document notes police and crime commissioners "worry about rates of exclusion driving knife crime" and acknowledges concerns it will impact disproportionately on children from some ethnic minority backgrounds, in particular black Caribbean boys, and those with special educational needs (SEN).*

The prevailing culture of the government is creating a hostile climate for Black autistic boys that says, 'We Have Given Up On You' rather than the promise implied in the OCC claim in 'They Never Give Up On You' where they state:

> *"Permanent exclusion has a negative effect on an excludee's life for far longer than the period immediately after exclusion. We knew a minority of schools exclude informally and therefore illegally but for the first time in this Inquiry have this on record. Whilst most schools work far beyond the call of duty to hold on to troubled and vulnerable children, a minority exclude on what seems to the observer to be a whim. And for whatever reasons, many of them explored in this report, we have not sufficiently challenged the failures and brought about the changes required. We must do so now" (OCC, 2012).*

I challenged the school to get justice for my son by successfully overturning the school decision to permanently exclude him. This included making decisions I wasn't always comfortable with.eg. imposing a psychiatric diagnosis of a disorder on my son, and supporting him to appreciate why this was important. This journey has been extremely difficult for me and my whole family and especially for my son. He's missed out on important aspects of adolescence with regard to friendships and relationships at school. The result of my son attending a PRU for fifteen months meant he was only able to access a limited curriculum, reducing his scope for GCSE subjects and qualifications. This experience has impacted on his life chances.

To change this situation for my son and other Black autistic boys I have shared my learning with you. What I hope will happen as a result of this article is that there will be great efforts to:

- address the gaps in the research into the experience of autistic African Caribbean boys and their families
- reduce the rising rates of permanent exclusions that disproportionately affect Black and autistic students
- better understand how the intersection of ableism and racism impacts on African Caribbean boys life-long wellbeing

In these ways we can begin to better understand the challenges facing Black autistic boys and to give them the life chance they are entitled to.

Key Words: African Caribbean, Autism, Disability, Intersectionality, School Exclusions

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