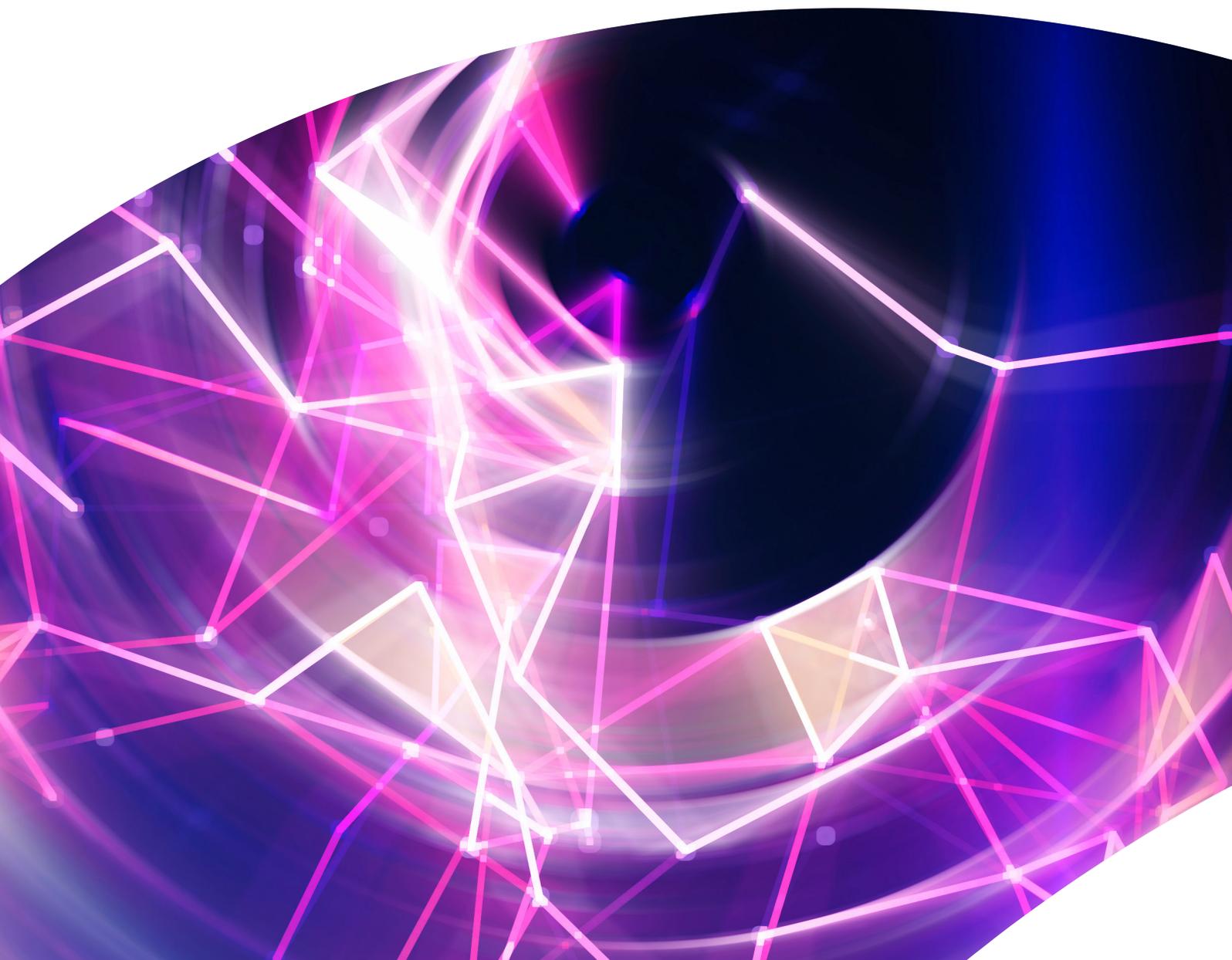




Confederation
of School Trusts

Powerful Knowledge as Social Justice

Part of the CST 'A Bridge to the Future' series



About the authors

Funmilola Stewart is Head of History at Dixons Trinity Academy. In 2020, Funmi was delighted to have been appointed 'Anti-Racism Pioneer' within school and has begun to support colleagues in developing strategies to 'decolonise' the curriculum at Trinity. In addition to this, Funmi is working alongside the Trust's Anti-Racism cross-cutting team in developing the Trust's new Anti-Racism policy.

Jenny Thompson is Principal of Dixons Trinity Academy in Bradford and an Executive Principal at Dixons Academies Trust. She was previously a SENCo and English teacher; she is also a Behaviour Adviser with the DfE.



Funmilola Stewart



Jenny Thompson

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Confederation of
School Trusts (CST)
Suite 10,
Whiteley Mill Offices,
39 Nottingham Road,
Nottingham NG9 8AD

cstuk.org.uk 

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Social mobility or social justice? More than a seat at the establishment table

Inequality. Powerful knowledge. Social justice. There ought to be a link here – some sort of glib equation perhaps? It seems like little more than common sense. But the risk is that the powerful knowledge being bestowed is seen as an advanced ticket to the establishment. A way into the pre-existing order of things for those who would not, otherwise, be expected to get there. Presenting no challenge and leading to no disruption of the establishment; the pre-existing order is sustained just with a couple of dashing new members – for whose presence, backs are heartily slapped. Old fellows!

And for so long and to so many that has been the source of pride; that has been the definition of social mobility. We (with our stellar degrees and our shimmering benevolence rode in on our white horses) took you, poor urban children of colour and taught you, gave you stringed instruments, classical music, the literary canon, smoothed your edges, topiaried your articulation and sent you off to Oxbridge to get your degrees, to step into London law firms and buy houses on streets where every other family is white.

And we felt so proud. Of you and of us.

We saved you.

Misguidance is not, by necessity, malice.

But the paradigm has rightfully shifted.

Time to get off the (high) white horse.

Social justice through education is more than affording our children a seat at the establishment table – it is the imbuing of knowledge and permission and self-determination to flip it once there. Social justice is not an advanced ticket to the establishment - it is the release of the visceral will to re-establish it.

Social justice in education involves a commitment to challenging the social, cultural, and economic inequalities imposed on individuals because of differential distribution of power, resources, and privilege (Mills College, 2020)¹. The application and delivery of powerful knowledge within schools is recognised as a tool for social justice but, for this to be truly consequential, our focus must shift from a broad consideration of the disparities between the elite and the disadvantaged, and towards an acknowledgement of the intersectionality underpinning social disadvantage.



An exploration of 'powerful knowledge'

Discussions surrounding the powerful knowledge to be imparted in schools cannot focus solely on providing disadvantaged students with access to 'elitist' knowledge but must also embody the need to include a range of voices and experiences, in order to strive for equitable education and progress for all marginalised groups.

This is not a binary case. The bonus of diversity (in both identity and cognitive definitions) is cumulative: the marginalised are represented and the eyeliner of the (consciously or otherwise) folk whose attitudes have led to marginalisation is extended. Without question it is much harder to accept inequality served upon that to which we are familiar – let alone upon a friend. Proximity of voice, exposure to one another proposes lifelong affiliations that dampen the writ-large structures of the pre-existing establishment.

Hearing the voices of the marginalised is the first step to dismantling structural marginalisation. Powerful knowledge is defined as 'the best truth that can be known' (Young et al, 2014)². In practical terms, this is an important definition which holds teachers to account in terms of delivering purposeful

and informative lessons, designed to equip students with knowledge. But who is the filter? Who is the knower of the truth? In whose voice is it spoken?

This definition serves as an important reminder for schools to ensure, through continuous scrutiny and adaptation, that schemes of work are of the best quality, to guarantee that the 'best truth' really is being delivered to students. Should this commitment to teaching the 'best truth' be a uniform requirement across all settings? There is hope that all students, regardless of socio-economic background, will be provided with knowledge that leads to opportunity. And this is not the polite bolt-on of Post-16 study; to be changing, it must be within the formative experiences of education. This, as so much, is predicated on the bright line shining out from the early years onwards.



Young continues that powerful knowledge can take students 'beyond their own experiences' (Young et al, 2014). In this sense, the desire is for equity to be achieved through exposing students, from all walks of life to knowledge that was once reserved for society's elite. As a result of socio-economic disadvantage, it is true that some children from less affluent backgrounds are less likely than their more affluent counterparts to be exposed to various elements of knowledge – and knowledge, that is, in our current societal structure, hugely facilitating.

In addition to this, there has been a tendency for marginalised groups to be encouraged to take vocational routes, as opposed to others, who are seen as more 'capable' of pursuing the academic route. Conscious or otherwise, this bias of educational input has led to a consistency of output used to justify the retention of the very inputs that generated the evidence base. Put simply, if you look at a child and decide to teach them less – even if that decision is not a conscious one – then they will almost invariably do less well than their peers who were taught more. Thus proving your decision to teach them less seemingly true – because, you see, they did less well. Didn't they?

The area of commonality for all these students is their access to school education, and so it is the duty of schools to ensure that the education they provide is focused on closing the aforementioned gaps through delivering equity for all.

Again, this is not a binary case – it is possible to improve the outcomes of our most marginalised groups to the point of equity with customarily highly performing peers without risking the outcomes for the customarily highly performing peers. There is no jeopardy. We have the evidence base. We know the outliers delivering this now and we know how they are doing it.

As such, why are we not acting at societal and structural levels? What is the risk? Who is making the decisions (or at very least suppressing the possibility of change)?

The concept of delivering powerful knowledge as an equitable tool is understandable but, to truly strive for social justice, it is important to question not to *whom* powerful knowledge should be taught, but *by whom* powerful knowledge is constructed and defined.

Young argues that powerful knowledge is developed 'by clearly distinguishable groups...with a clearly defined focus or field of enquiry'.

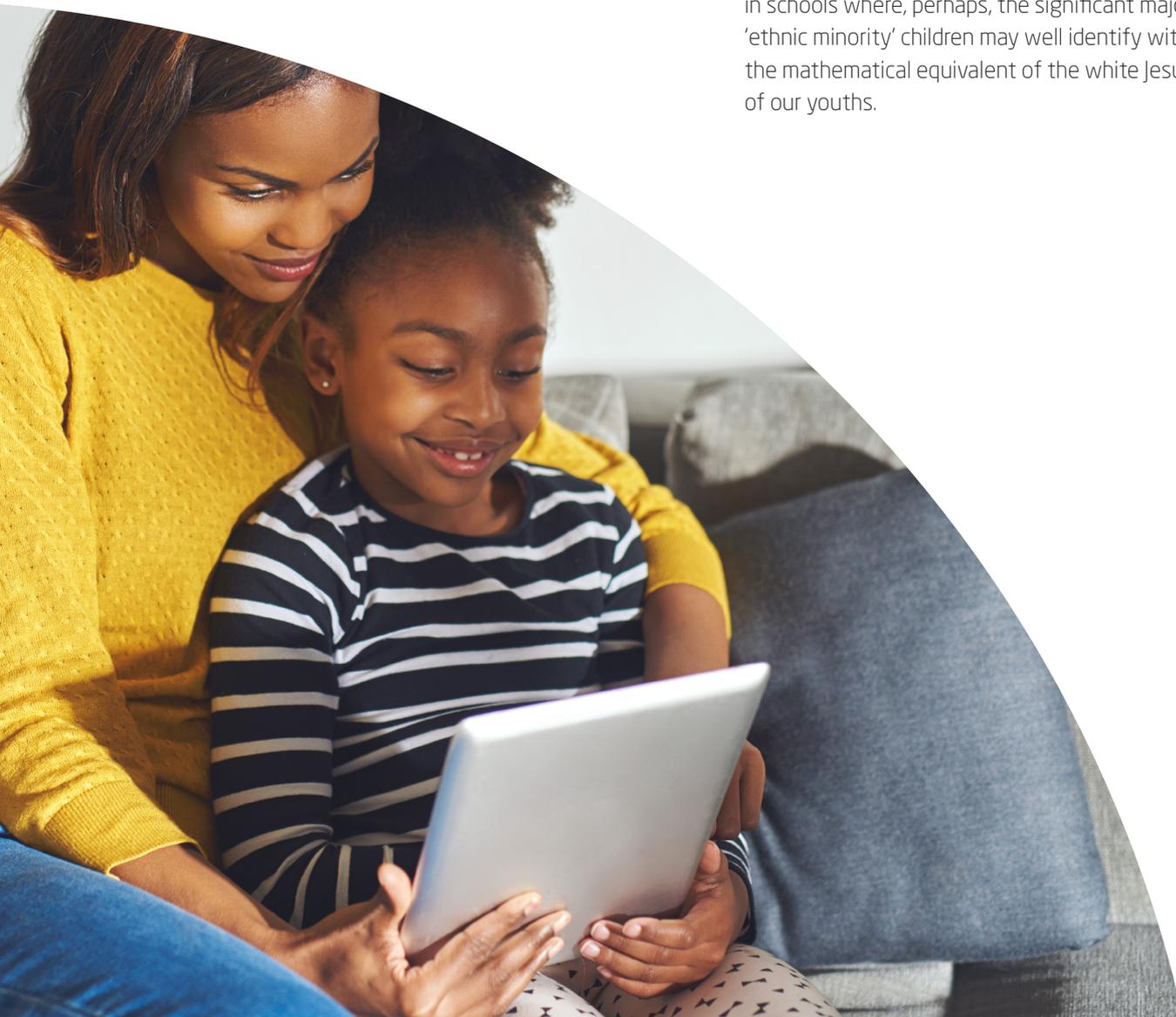


This is a prerequisite to ensure that the knowledge imparted within schools is specialised and based on expertise. Omitted from Young's analysis, however, is a requirement for discussions surrounding powerful knowledge to include a range of voices, rather than being based solely upon the ideas of the 'dominant culture'.

In principle, it makes sense that powerful knowledge should be the substantive content, broadly agreed upon by the experts within each subject community. However, as proponents for the diversification and decolonisation of the curriculum would emphasise, if that subject community is only representative of one faction of society, which has only ever acknowledged substantive content based on the dominant culture, it excludes the expertise of minority groups.

By only imparting this knowledge, we run the risk of upholding the very notions of inequality that proponents of social justice aspire to deconstruct. This is not to be confused with debates over relativity and decisions over which newly acquired knowledge should be deemed powerful. This is centered on knowledge that has always been there, and should always have been salient, but has been overlooked due to epistemic injustice.

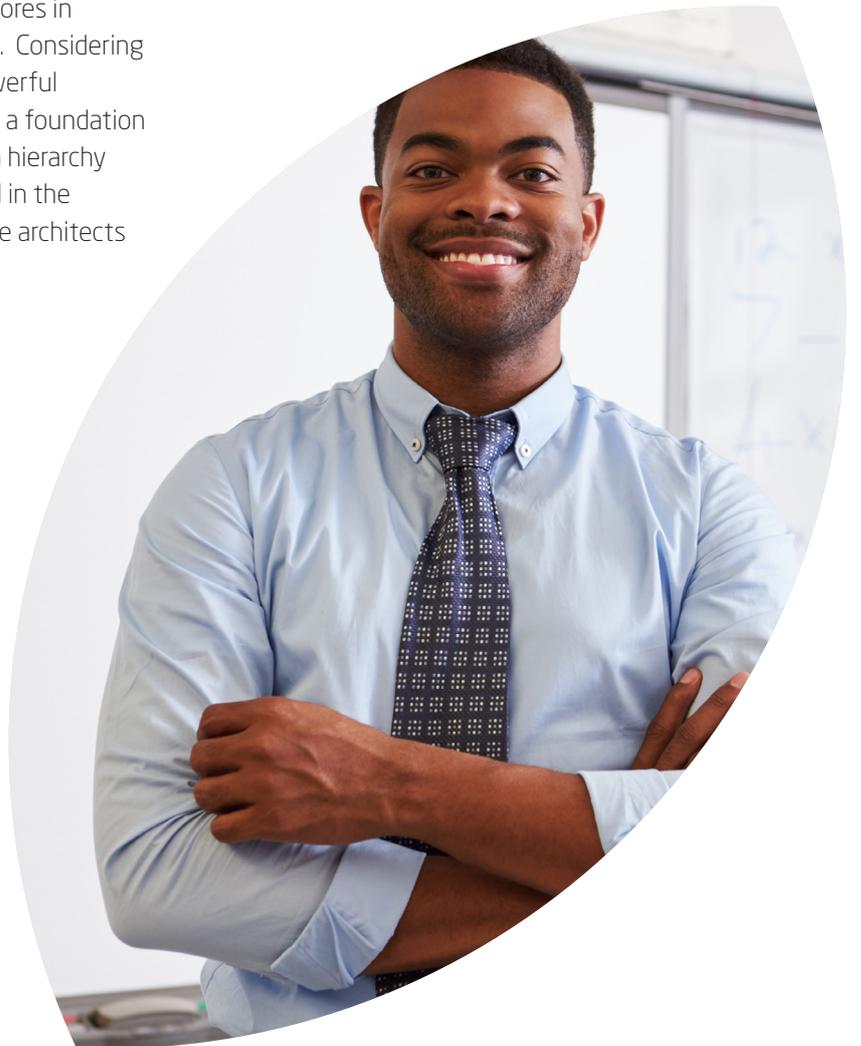
This is not, as such, a re-thinking of powerful knowledge. It is offering the proposal of an additional filter through which to navigate curricular discussions. A reasonable cypher would be acknowledging that ethnic minority is a relative term: it is defining a group of people relative to the dominant culture in their present local geographical proportion. As such, for example, missing the opportunity to speak to our children about the Arabic roots of mathematical theorems that litter the GCSE specification in schools where, perhaps, the significant majority of 'ethnic minority' children may well identify with this – is the mathematical equivalent of the white Jesus pictures of our youths.



Diversity in our classrooms - a force for good

It is important to remember that UK schools are not made up of one homogenous group of students and nor do 'deprived' groups all share common characteristics. Ethnic minority students represent a significant percentage of the UK school population, making up 34% of primary schools and 32% of the secondary school population (DFE, 2020)³. With this level of diversity comes a range of cultures and, for social justice to prevail, we must avoid undervaluing knowledge linked to the cultures and heritage of such a significant proportion of our students. The importance of this can be gleaned through a closer look at outcomes. For example, it has been found that Black Caribbean and White British students who are eligible for free school meals (FSM) continue to see extremely poor Attainment 8 scores in comparison to other ethnic groups (CSJ, 2020)⁴. Considering the current thought process, that delivering powerful knowledge to disadvantaged students can form a foundation for better opportunities, we can envisage how a hierarchy between these two groups could be heightened in the absence of careful consideration surrounding the architects of powerful knowledge.

If, for example, the necessary substantive knowledge was agreed upon solely by White British experts, positionality may lead to bias and blind spots, rendering White British culture presented as essential knowledge and ideas representative of Black Caribbean culture omitted. Whilst this may meet the objective of exposing both groups of deprived students to the knowledge of the elite, it may simultaneously, subconsciously, and dangerously suggest to both groups that White British students *deserve* to be higher in the hierarchy, whilst Black Caribbean *belong* at the bottom.



³ Department for Education (2020) Schools, pupils and their characteristics. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/schools-pupils-and-their-characteristics-january-2020> (Accessed: 1 March 2020).

⁴ Centre for Social Justice (2020) Facing the Facts: Ethnicity and Disadvantage in Britain: Disparities in education, work, and family. Available at: <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/CSJ18513-Ethnicity-Poverty-Report-FINAL.pdf> (Accessed: 1 March 2020).

In the absence of a sudden shift towards social change and equality, it is important to acknowledge that, within different societies, there are certain pieces of knowledge that we must understand to progress. Due to this, there are elements of 'cultural capital' and 'essential knowledge' that students should be taught to allow for academic success. Rather than accepting these as the only truths, however, this knowledge becomes much more powerful when combined with examples from other cultures and societies, along with honest discussions surrounding the constructions of power.

This combination of accessing the collective knowledge base, as well as recognising the valuable contributions of their own and other communities, will provide students with

the opportunity to improve their socio-economic outcomes, as well as developing a voice to continue to advocate progress. In this sense, social justice is achieved through teaching students to *acknowledge*, rather than *assimilate* to the accepted 'norms' of society, as well as providing them with the language to debate these ideas. The more able we are to develop our students' understanding of such things, the better placed they will be to develop their own future platforms, upon which they can deliver their own powerful contributions.

And then we will feel so proud. Of them and of us.



Where do we begin?

So, who is responsible? How can this be implemented? Where can we possibly begin?

As with any school policy, engagement from staff is essential and, for alignment to be reached, direction should be provided by leadership. This cannot take the form of the traditional 'top-down' approach, and orders akin to 'all lessons must be inclusive of ethnic minorities' will not suffice here. Vague statements lead to misunderstandings, misconceptions and misgivings. Often, ambiguous instructions to 'diversify' translate to 'include more images of black and brown faces in the PowerPoints' at best and disgruntled retorts echoing the infamous 'all lives matter' rhetoric at worst. In order for curricular changes to be transformative, staff must *understand* the reasons behind the emphasis on challenging the status quo before they begin to attempt it.

Universally, there are huge Wordsworthian "horizon's bound" peaks preventing individuals from empathising with marginalised groups and the teaching profession is no different.

But we, teachers, are such strong communicators, such devout listeners, such adaptable, compassionate and tolerant figures, aren't we?

Of course we are. But we can be all of these things whilst simultaneously being unenlightened, *ignorant* even, to the experiences of those whose circumstances differ to our own. 85.9% of the teacher workforce is White British and we must recognise that, again, positionality falls into play here. Subconsciously, our identities influence and potentially bias our outlook on the world and so, for a huge proportion of the UK teaching population, a lack of physical and cognitive diversity within schools is unlikely to resonate without discussions being prompted.



This is where training becomes vital. New fire safety policy? We train and adapt. New strategies for developing literacy? We train and adapt. Worldwide pandemic with huge implications for schools? We all, in our hundreds of thousands, train and adapt. We are used to being introduced to new information, taking the time to process said information and then beginning to implement our findings. The same approach should be taken with the curriculum. There is no better means of ensuring this than orchestrating a team, or *teams*, to focus directly on the acquisition and delivery of powerful knowledge. Staff within such teams must be representative of a range of backgrounds, thoughts and experiences in order to provide different lenses through which powerful knowledge can be considered. Signposting this as a distinct responsibility ensures that enough time can be dedicated to research and subsequent discussions, which in turn means that whole staff training is purged of tokenism and relays quality information. We know that teachers experience a significant workload. By removing the obligation of individual responsibility for background research into the theory of powerful knowledge, teachers' time can be reserved for subject specific implementation.

Take, for example, a school or trust with a team focused on anti-racist thought as one entity, and a teaching and learning team as another. One team develops expertise on challenging racism and the other develops expert strategies on the delivery of knowledge within the classroom. Where both teams' findings are discussed and combined, the outcome is the development of clear insights into exactly how to deliver knowledge that represents and elevates

students from all backgrounds. Where this forms the basis of training, subject teachers take away an understanding of which topics need to be reviewed, as well as which resources need to be adapted or indeed created.

It would be amiss to close without a challenge – here, we have discussed diversification, inclusivity, and voice through the lens of ethnicity; however, we do so to track an experience of present inequality while being mindful that inequality in all its forms is structurally, societally and educationally pervasive and deserving equally of our time.

In a recent meeting, we were reminded of this as educational colleagues working in a different trust kept referring to the need to be inclusive but entirely understanding this from a point of having non-white authors represented in their English curriculum. We repeatedly drew them to the point that this was the same blind-alley thinking that had led to the absence of multiple voices in the first place. Why only non-white? Why only race? Why only English? Were they considering gender, disability, sexuality – every subject, every day? The response given was that they had only received criticism on the point of their representation of ethnic diversity in literature, hence that was what they were seeking to amend. Not a deeply held conviction – just a top up... an add on in response to public criticism. Our children deserve more.