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“Wanna preach about diversity? What have you actually done?”

Dr Charlotte Haines Lyon, Kalen Reid, Dr Joan Walton, Dr Graham Bright, Dr Linda Walz

In 2020, during an almost worldwide lockdown, the death of George Floyd sparked worldwide protests, mainly under the banner of Black Lives Matter (BLM). The protests about racial inequality were amplified by a global pandemic disproportionately impacting Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities (Platt, 2021). This article reports on a longitudinal research project with educators and students during the two English lockdowns. It examines quotations from ‘Keisha’, a Black university student, whose experience reflects other data demonstrating an extraordinary disconnect between those at the top of universities (executive management) and the staff and student body. Keisha highlighted how rhetoric displaces racial justice.

Relational disconnect

The initial project involved two meetings each with six different focus groups representing staff of universities, colleges, schools and youth services, as well as university students. The first meeting (July 2020) involved each group reflecting on their experience of education under lockdown and identifying a topic they wished to explore for the second meeting. During the second lockdown, in February 2021, we approached the initial participants to find out what had changed and had been learnt. The main finding was that the disconnect in relationships between executive management and everyone else had substantially increased across all groups.

Floyd and COVID-19

When the first student groups met, they had been learning remotely since March, unable to leave their houses except in limited circumstances for several months.

Keisha explained the difficulty of being a Black student during the BLM protests exacerbated under lockdown, in a pandemic that impacted Black students economically and medically more than their white contemporaries. Whilst Keisha had “literally been living this hell my entire life”, the fear of the pandemic combined with the inability to meet with others to seek comfort, reflect on and unpick what was happening was particularly problematic. Angered by her university making statements on social media about BLM, but not working with Black students, Keisha said, “no one’s actually asked if I’m okay”.

Performative allyship over social justice

The project highlighted the lack of relationality in the sector with senior managers making pronouncements that one lecturer described as having the “emotional intelligence of a jackhammer”. When the whiteness and colonial legacy of universities were in question, to omit talking to the students most impacted is at best performative white allyship (Levine-Rasky and Ghaffar-Siddiqui, 2020). As Keisha said, universities “want to do something for Black and Minority Ethnic students instead of just asking them”. This echoes Bhopal’s (2018) criticism that universities are keen to support Black students, yet do not want to address the problematic structural inequalities. Moreover, taking public stands against racism often locates racism elsewhere, without having to examine our complicity (Delfino,

2021). Ultimately, this research highlighted that executive decisions increased existing inequalities, particularly for Black students, rather than positively addressing them.

References

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