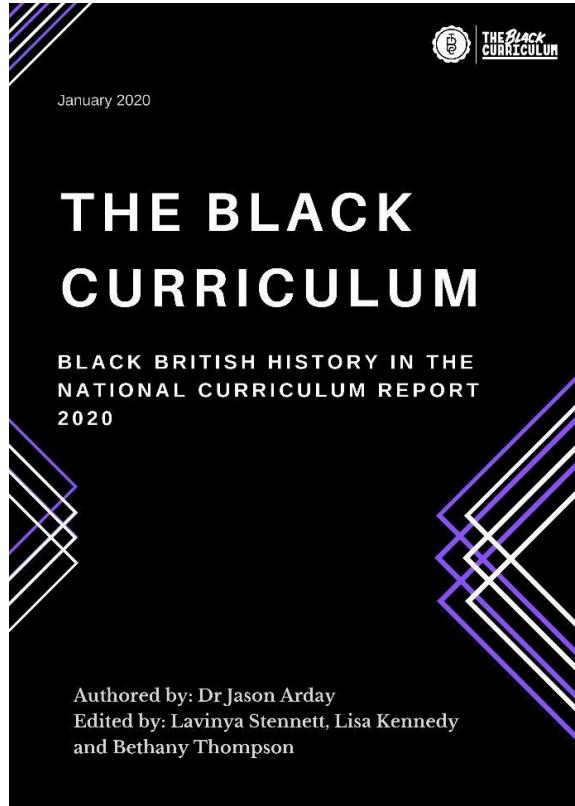


Reforming Ideals: Approaches to Education and The Black Curriculum

By: Katherine Kennedy

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The first line of the 'Rationale' in The Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) syllabus for Caribbean History is as follows:

"This syllabus has been guided by a particular view of the nature of history as a discipline, the educational needs of students, and the desire to promote the development of an ideal Caribbean person."

The document does go on to clarify its aims to foster critical thought, with no singular attempt "...to promote one organizing principle or interpretation of Caribbean History," and acknowledge "...the need for a respect of human life and a cultural heritage that values harmony and cherishes diversity as a strength." However, I could not help but question part of the opening statement: what is an "ideal Caribbean person?"

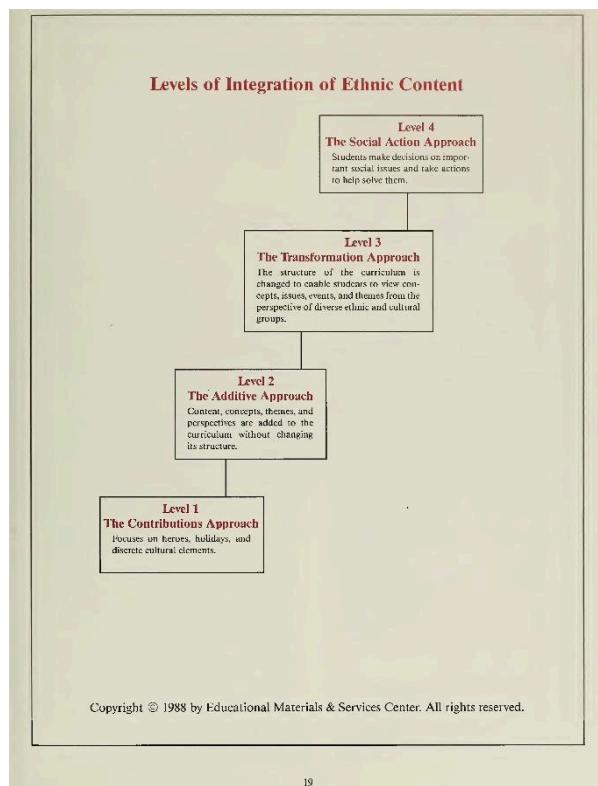
As disconcerting as I found that concept – the word "ideal" triggering romanticised notions of the Caribbean as paradise, or being essentialised into one paradigm rather than the complex and dynamic region it is – I deeply appreciate the importance of our schools prioritising 'Caribbean History' and recognising that it does not exist in isolation; Caribbean history is global history. This idea of interconnectedness is also at the heart of The Black Curriculum, a

UK-based initiative that aims to teach Black British History all year round, challenging the Eurocentric focus of their school system.

Founder/Director of The Black Curriculum, Lavinya Stennett, came to Barbados in 2023 as part of the Welcome Stamp programme, which has promoted the island as a destination for remote-workers since 2020. On her connection to Barbados, Stennett says “Barbados has always been on my mind, since it was the first country I travelled to as a child.” It has since held a special place for her, and in the context of her work on educational reform in the UK and Barbados’ colonial past, this environment makes sense for her research and practice to thrive.

The Black Curriculum addresses the widespread and systematic erasure of communities and cultures that have been pivotal in British history, whose omission has contributed to racist and xenophobic rhetoric that runs entirely counter to the multicultural realities of the country. When asked to share reflections around education and cultural heritage in Barbados, Stennett observed:

“Cultural memory is something I really appreciate being here. Seeing Bussa on the highway as a remembrance of what ancestors have achieved, to the many public holidays such as Emancipation Day and Kadooment Day that in real time commemorate the history and cultural heritage of this nation really speaks to me. They are not just days observed ritualistically or in passing, which tends to be the case in the UK. In fact, they are ingrained across education and into the public sectors. As a former student of African Studies and as CEO of a national Black educational movement in the UK, I really appreciate this active form of heritage - it makes the picture of reparatory justice much clearer.”



In the article 'Approaches to Multicultural Reform' originally published in 1988 by Professor James A. Banks, he identifies four approaches to integrating multicultural content, one of which – The Contributions Approach – focuses on "heroes, holidays and discrete cultural elements." The impact of having ready access to our history, not only in academic settings but in our everyday life, is something that can easily be taken for granted. Struggles faced Black and Caribbean diasporic people who have been consistently othered in their geographic locations, remind us of how crucial these cultural symbols are. However, this does not mean that there is not a long way for us to go when it comes to understanding our history, heritage, and ever-evolving culture, nor should we ignore the very real issues that we face as a country still reckoning with the legacy of colonialism in our lived experiences.

"There is still a huge gap in seeing how the political landscape here embraces the conversation as urgent, at a crisis point for change, and not something meant to benefit the government. From the tourism sector not benefitting the everyday Barbadian, an extremely high cost of living, and a mental health crisis among young people, it's imperative that history addresses and makes a case for improving the current needs of this society. I think there are many people who are ready to do something about it, and I'm proud to know them," Stennett commented.

It is imperative that we do not become complacent, or allow progress to stagnate – the aforementioned article by Banks mentions that reform is at its strongest when all the approaches are used in tandem. The structure for our education is there, but gaps exist in interrogating the wider impact and ongoing effects of our past, and how we go about dismantling systems and practices that no longer serve us.

While there will never be a singular ideal for a Barbadian, let alone a Caribbean person, perhaps the closest we can get to ideal circumstances might come from bridging these gaps, nurturing the critical thinking necessary to link our history to our present, and using this knowledge as a means of empowerment to reconsider the future.

848 words

Image captions:

1. Lavinya Stennett. Photo credit: Lewis Patrick.
2. Cover of *The Black Curriculum: Black British History in the National Curriculum Report 2020*.
3. James A. Banks, "Approaches to Multicultural Curriculum Reform," *Trotter Review*: Vol. 3: Iss. 3, Article 5.