

## Are we honest about our history?

With Kwame Boateng from The Black Curriculum

00:00:01 Kwame Boateng, The Black Curriculum

There's not one history. There is not one truth. There are multiple truths. For us at The Black Curriculum. It's not about replacing one history with another, but it's about complementing the multiple histories that exist in the search, maybe you could say, for truth, and that's not to say that truth can ever be found, but it's just it's a constant process, like a puzzle that builds up to the bigger picture. Maybe you could say that the puzzle isn't finished and maybe it will never be finished, but we just need to continue to add smaller pieces, so that the bigger picture is made up.

00:00:42 Lowell Wallbank, Manchester Museum

Hello and welcome to the Manchester Museum Podcast. Today we are speaking with Kwame Boateng from The Black Curriculum, a social enterprise campaigning to get Black British history taught in schools, 365 days of the year. Established in 2019, The Black Curriculum have been delivering arts focused history programs to schoolchildren across the UK, believing that a balanced and integrated teaching of our shared history can facilitate real social change.

In this episode, we ask the question, 'Are we honest about our history?' and discuss what we can gain from learning stories that are often overlooked, but first Kwame told me a little bit more about The Black Curriculum's origins and their Teach Black History 365 campaign.

00:01:23 Kwame Boateng

In The Black Curriculum we started with a vision, Lavinya Stennett, which is the founder of The Black Curriculum, she basically piloted this program with a few other people in October during Black History Month and she did it with the vision of trying to get Black history within schools 365 days a year. So really, what she was questioning was what is the importance of Black history? And should it be restricted to just one month? She utilised the Black History Month to kind of pilot programmes with the younger individuals and it worked really, really well, and after that we decided to go full time. So

we're a social enterprise that focuses on teaching Black British history or the British history, more wider British history, both inside and outside of schools. The way that we see if we can get it embedded into the National Curriculum. What it means is that first of all, it legitimises Black British History, and it doesn't become a choice because at the moment in the National Curriculum you have set things which you must teach, and then recommendations which you can teach under that. So really, the responsibility in many ways falls on the teacher not just to want to put it in, but to also know of these things. And again, as we're talking about now, a lot of this history a lot of people don't know. Even I myself, this has been a huge learning curve for me since working with The Black Curriculum, you know, there's a lot of things that I didn't know and so, what it's about is getting these resources for teachers to see and then be able to incorporate, and that's kind of to promote empowerment for all individuals and knowledge of our own history and to try and, I suppose, give a rounded approach to education which is empowering and leads young individuals to want to enquire more about themselves and their history because history is constantly moving. We're always a part of history. I think that a lot of the time we look at history as something that happens in the past, but we are agents in the creation of history. We make history in the present and I think this year we've seen a lot of that as well. For a lot of people, we've acknowledged that was taking place here now, with the coronavirus and everything and the various protests around the world, is that these are important process of history. So, that's what we try and do with The Black Curriculum is that we try and empower younger individuals to see themselves within a wider context, which is history, in a way which challenges them to think critically.

00:03:56 Lowell Wallbank

Education can be a powerful tool in fighting racism. The Windrush Review recommended that colonial and migration history be taught, and the Macpherson Report into the killing of Stephen Lawrence showed that cultural diversity within the Curriculum is one of the ways to prevent racism. But 21 years on not much has changed in classrooms across the country. Kwame explained the limitations of the current teaching of Black history in schools and the importance of giving students a deeper understanding of their history.

00:04:25 Kwame Boateng

Prior to The Black Curriculum being started, I think the education around Black history largely focuses around slavery, which is quite disempowering. Black British history is more than the transatlantic slave trade. And when you're focusing on something that depicts Black people as something that history happens to, as not being having an active role in history, it can have very disempowering connotations for younger individuals, whether they be Black or White in the way in which you view Black people, or

the way in which you view yourself. So that was something that we wanted to focus on and try and combat at The Black Curriculum. We wanted to look at Black British history, not just from the perspective of slavery, but from an empowering perspective that looks at the thousands of years of history dating back to, you know, the Tudors and I know that there's been some research done to even the Roman times as well. So, we wanted to focus on this long legacy of Black British history that goes beyond just the transatlantic slave trade and look at the relationship that the United Kingdom has had with Africa, historically.

00:05:35 Lowell Wallbank

October is Black History Month in the UK, but the team at The Black Curriculum are campaigning for it to be taught all year round. I ask Kwame what the importance of an integrated Black history taught 365 days a year was.

00:05:50 Kwame Boateng

So, I think the importance stems a lot from the fact that Black history is our shared history and at the moment what we tend to do is we tend to segregate the two in terms of what is considered as history history, and was an alternative history and when we begin to teach it 365 days a year, what will happen is we get a more rounded understanding of the United Kingdom or the history that has taken place in the United Kingdom. So, for example, you know, during the years you might learn about King Henry VII and King Henry VIII, or whatnot, you would learn about that and then that would be it. And then Black History Month would roll around and you may learn a little bit about slavery, you may learn a little bit about the civil rights movement in America and various other things, but it tends to be, it's not as reflective of the what's taken place here in the United Kingdom. So, to use the example of King Henry VII and King Henry VIII, King Henry VII and VIII had an entrusted trumpeter and his name was John Blanke. He's famously been called that the 'Blacke Trumpet', because not much is really known about him. He's depicted on the Westminster Scrolls, kind of playing for King Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon, at the birth of their son. And the role that he takes is very centre stage. It shows that he's not somebody that is just very low level. He was paid a wage. He played King Henry VII funeral. He also played for King Henry VIII, and he asked for pay rises from them both as well, so this is something that can stand side by side between the history of King Henry VII, King Henry VIII, but normally is side-lined. So, when we want to teach Black history 365 days a year, what it's about, what it's saying is that there are parts of history that compliment the history that is currently being taught. And in order to understand the multiplicities, you know, the many different aspects of history that make up British history, we also have to move beyond the dominant narrative, so to speak.

00:08:03 Lowell Wallbank

The Curriculum is broken into four modules: Politics in the Legal System, Land and the Environment, Migration and Art History. Using the topic of Calypso music, Kwame broke down their approach to teaching.

00:08:16 Kwame Boateng

We tend to focus largely around an arts-based syllabus, and that's kind of as and when it can be used, but to give you an example, one of the modules that we have is Art History and you know when you think of Art History, you might think of looking at painters and stuff like this, but we like to focus on Calypso music and sound system culture, and reggae. And so, for those that don't know Calypso music was known as a kind of the poor man's newspaper, in a way in which it would record what was going on in specific areas, what was going on in politics. It was also used a lot during World War II and a little bit during World War I as well, although they're hard to come by. But during World War II you get information about what was taking place on the world stage. So, we like to focus on the use of Calypso Music to transmit information, but beyond, maybe a nation state or whatnot, for a diaspora and stuff, so we focus on the use of Calypso Music, and how that eventually turned into reggae music and how reggae music influence sound system culture in which sound system culture came here to the United Kingdom along with the Windrush Generation, which massively influenced contemporary music that we have today. So, when we're looking at this, what we kind of do is we look at, we studied the meter of Calypso poetry, you know, the timing and the meter of Calypso poetry. And we work together we'll maybe put some poems together ourselves and at the end will have students read it out. We also use the debating methods as well, so we'll have some people on one team, someone the other, and we'll work around particular arguments and structures. So we have a lot of different exercises that we use that, you know, it's not just writing things down or we're asking people to kind of get up out of their chairs, and what do you think of this here and what do you think of that there and everything like that. So, it tends to be a lot more, it's more celebratory because we don't focus on the negative aspects of history. But also, it's a lot more energetic and in different places, and just in general, quite fun.

00:10:24 Lowell Wallbank

In connecting history to modern day phenomena and wider global and political themes, The Black Curriculum aimed to build a sense of belonging and identity in younger people. We discussed the impact that Black history has had on contemporary British culture and how understanding our shared history can improve social cohesion.

00:10:43 Kwame Boateng

Black history, Black culture has dramatically changed the landscape of British culture and to go back to, say, sound system culture and stuff like this, sound system culture has dramatically changed the way that we see and view music. Just as Blues change the way that we saw music with rock music and stuff. Now in contemporary society we have dance music, we have hip hop, we have grind, we have all these different genres, which has changed the way that kids are, the music the kids are listening to. You know, kids are all listening to these certain musicians and listen to hip hop and whatnot. There's this kind of countercultures, there's youth movements, there's subcultures that are taking place that exist around this. Also, linguistically as well, you know when you go to any urban areas and sometimes in rural areas as well, depending on their proximity to urban areas, you see linguistically that they're using different words. You know, they are using what you might call slang, but in London it's recognised as its own language, which is the London Multi-ethnic language. You know, sort of linguistically, the formation of the United Kingdom is changing as well. So, I would say that it's not just about Black history, it's about understanding the way in which if you want to see it from a national point of view, the way in which our nation is never static, it's always changing. There's always a flow of people coming in and out and the culture always changes as a result of that. It's a way of viewing our nation as something which is constantly moving, constantly progressing, constantly changing and in order to keep up with that change, in many aspects, you also have to know about it, you have to reflect on it, and you have to give value to it. So, it's not just about Black history or White history, but it's about our shared collective history and it's about the way in which that history is now, as a result of it happening in the past, is now beginning to change the present. So, you know, it's very interesting, but that is, again, that's how history works, and that's throughout history, you know, it's kind of like a combination of multiple cultures, and then we move forward with a new culture or at least a pathway to new cultures.

00:12:56 Lowell Wallbank

As the tone of current discussions has often proven, being honest about some of the more painful aspects of our history can be uncomfortable. I wanted to know what Kwame thought we stood to gain as a nation by having these conversations.

00:13:09 Kwame Boateng

I think we gain a lot. We gain a lot, and I'll actually read a little quote by Ben Okri, because I think that he's a poet, he's a writer, so he puts it very beautifully, so it's Ben Okri, and it's in one of his books called, 'A Way of Being Free'. So, he says, "Nations and peoples are largely the stories they feed themselves. If they tell themselves stories that are lies,

they will suffer the future consequences of those lies. If they tell themselves stories that face their own truths, they will free their histories for future flowerings." And I really love that quote and I think it's really important in terms of what we're talking about here, are we honest about our history? As we've kind of touched on throughout this podcast, is that history is not something that there is one truth, nor is there another but, but history is the way in which we understand ourselves as a nation, as a people both culturally and politically. And so, when we understand or when we look for the stories that aren't being told in our history, we begin to understand maybe aspects of ourselves that we haven't visited, which is really important for a process of healing, of recovery, and it's important, again for solidifying ourselves as a nation or as a people. And when Ben Okri kind of says if they tell themselves stories that are lies then they will suffer the consequences of those lies, I think again we have come to a point now that if we're able to be honest about our history, if we're able to unpack it, if we're able to see, kind of, the political nature of history, or the way in which history shapes how we view the world, if we're able to achieve that, then I think that we will, as Ben Okri says, open ourselves up for future flowerings, we'll be able to move beyond it, again, if you know where you've been then you know where you're going and I think that that would allow our paths to be more clearer, and the same for us at The Black Curriculum, is this is what we hold in general, is that with the hope of kind of excavating our shared past, we can begin to move forward into the shared future.

00:15:25 Lowell Wallbank

How does questioning the narratives that we have been given allow us to grow? In museums, as an education, the idea of Decolonisation is prevalent. But what does it mean?

00:15:38 Kwame Boateng

To kind of decolonise education or to decolonise museums is really just to think critically about the nature of knowledge itself. Where does knowledge come from? How do we apply value to knowledge? Whether, again whether it's kind of in its abstract form whether it's in objects or material cultures as you do with the museums, but how do we give value to these things? At museums, I suppose like many institutions, they're political in nature, in the sense of because when you when you have something in a museum, you give meaning to it. You say that this is worth remembering, and that then impacts future generations on school trips, or whether being dragged to the museum by their parents, or whether you genuinely just wanna go to museum, you know, I love museums. But you know, from whatever age group, they influence the way that you see the world, and that's why it's really important for us to diversify, whether it be museums, diversify our education, because ultimately what you're doing is you're giving value to certain things, you're giving value to certain stories or certain findings or

certain materials, or whatever it be, and so the work of decolonising, whether it be in education or in museums, is largely about questioning that and looking at these histories and looking at possibly the way that history has allowed us to think a certain way about particular things. And again, when we go back to The work of The Black Curriculum and trying to kind of open up our history, Black history, and unpack it and try to understand it more and everything it's questioning; OK, so this is the story that we have so far, what more can we find out about this, that's other than what is just being told to us? You know, and should we be valuing other stories over the dominant narrative, which is normally the transatlantic slave trade? Should we be, not valuing, is maybe the wrong word, because it's incredibly important aspect of history, but should we be complementing it and adding equal value to other narratives that are somewhat more empowering? And I would say that that is in a nutshell, you know, the work of decolonisation in education and I suppose the work of decolonisation, I could imagine the work of decolonisation in the museum, about looking at these things, looking whether it's the shows that you're putting on or the curation, you know, the politics of space and how are you going to add value to certain pieces, as at museums, you have tons of archives and tons of things as well, so what can you use? And it's the same in education with the study of knowledge, you know, there's tons of books, there's tons of pieces of history and it's like OK, so what can we bring to the forefront now to allow us to learn a little bit more about ourselves? Which story do we want to tell and how do we want to tell it? You know, you can tell the same story five times over in different ways, and it will bring about different emotional responses in a person, so we have, I think, we have the power to look at our history and to look at our future and say, well, this is where we want to go with it. And that depends on how we tell the story.

00:19:08 Lowell Wallbank

A massive thank you to Kwame for joining us this week. If you enjoyed the conversation and would like to find out more, you can visit [theblackcurriculum.com](https://theblackcurriculum.com) and check the podcast description for more links. The idea of shedding light on untold stories is one that we will be exploring in the first series of the podcast. In the next episode, we're asking who owns Egyptian Heritage with our guest Heba Abd el Gawad and the Museum's Curator of Egyptology Campbell Price. Campbell tells us a little bit more about Heba's work and how museums can talk openly and honestly about some of the more uncomfortable aspects of their own histories.

00:19:50 Campbell Price, Curator of Egypt and Sudan, Manchester Museum

I think museums are about stories ultimately, and as Kwame has said, stories should be complex. There is no one absolute truth, and what we should try and do in museums and what I think we're really trying to do in Manchester Museum is complexify or offer a more rich and varied story and sometimes those stories are quite uncomfortable to

listen to. And so, listening to people from outside the Museum, I think, let's us present different stories because people come to museums expecting to get told facts, and often there are no facts, there are no absolute truths. But trying to diversify the story, enrich the story, is something we're all about. As an Egyptologist, as the Curator in charge of the Egyptian and Sudanese collection, I'm particularly interested in the colonial history of how those objects were acquired, and again, that is quite an uncomfortable story, and so I've spoken to a number of colleagues, and I'm delighted to share a chat I had with Heba Abd el Gawad, an Egyptian colleague who's leading a project entitled, 'Egypt's Dispersed Heritage', and so Heba reflects on a lot of the same issues as Kwame in our next podcast.