Where it really matters ...

Debbie Epstein & Alison Sealey

Debbie and Alison wrote 'Where it really matters ...' some 30 years ago. We asked them five questions.

Their response sets the scene for this issue of The Elephant Times

1. What have you been doing since working for Birmingham LEA on this project?

We both became academics!

Debbie worked at the University of London Institute of Education, now part of UCL, where she taught and developed courses about gender, sexuality and race in education. She retired as Professor of Cultural Studies in Education at the University of Roehampton last year.

Alison taught about language at several universities before retiring last year as a Professor of Applied Linguistics from Lancaster University.

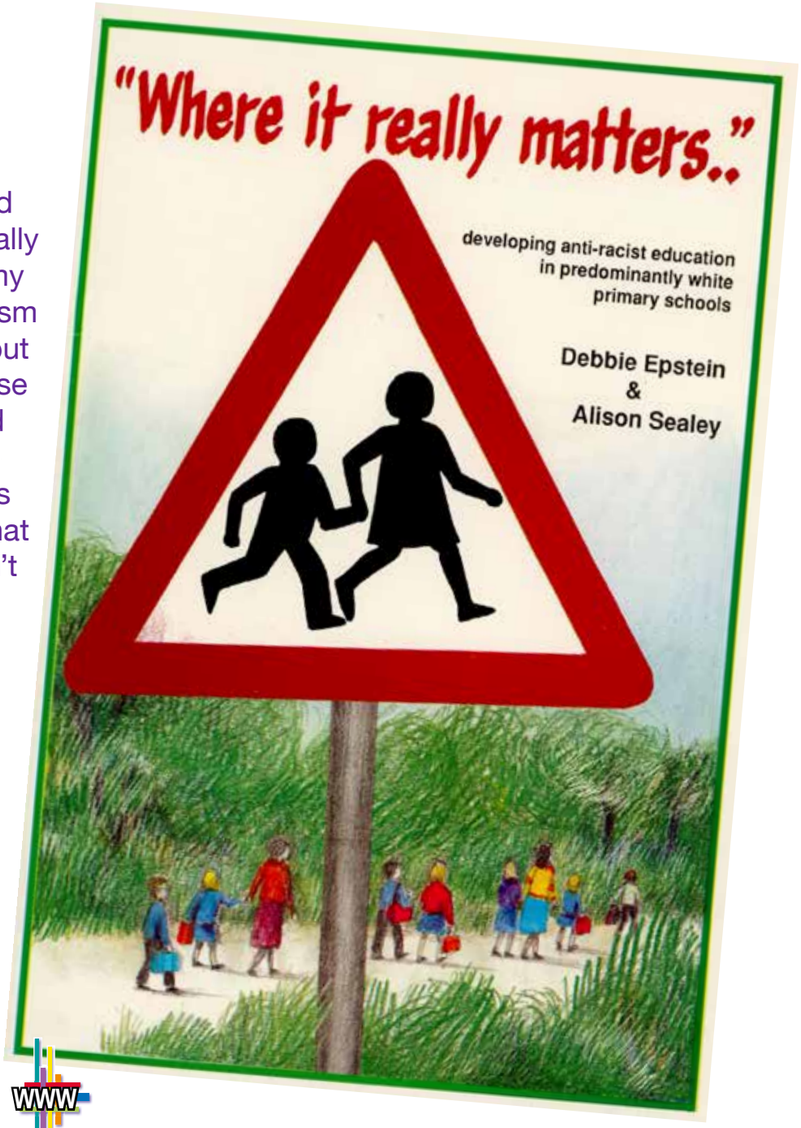
2. Why was it important to focus on predominantly white primary schools?

We had been active in anti-racist politics for some time, in different local authorities, as members of NAME [National Antiracist Movement in Education]. Alison taught English in schools with significant numbers of pupils for whom it was an Additional Language, and Debbie had run sessions for teachers about multicultural education, with a focus on white schools.

We were both aware of areas in Birmingham where **racism was growing, often unchallenged, since the perceived 'problem' was the presence of minorities and the perceived 'solutions' involved their education.** So as well as supporting the development of an inclusive curriculum in culturally diverse schools, we saw an urgent need to tackle prejudice and ignorance in areas where non-white people were perceived as a threat.

Debbie: I grew up in apartheid South Africa, became politically involved early, and knew in my bones, so to speak, that racism was important everywhere, but particularly important for those who had neither experienced nor been aware of it before – accepting the status quo was at the root of much racism that existed, but that people didn't always notice.

Alison: I'd been very aware that the policy response to the increasing diversity of school populations, particularly after the arrival of citizens from Kenya, Uganda, Pakistan and other parts of the Commonwealth in the 1960s, focused attention on immigrant children, and while meeting their specific educational needs was important, it wasn't the whole story.



Publication available as a download

Debbie: Yes, even in the predominantly white schools where I was teaching in Hertfordshire, the levels of panic about the arrival of migrants, particularly those for whom English was their second or third language, was extraordinary. So I jumped at the chance of working in Birmingham with teachers in predominantly white schools, in a much more diverse city than either Watford or Hemel Hempstead.

Alison: As I had always taught in very 'mixed' areas, in London and then Birmingham, Debbie's experience complemented mine as we began to work together.

3. What do you recall of how this idea was received?

What were the challenges?

Debbie: It depends on whether you think about the responses of teachers, parents or the media. This was the time of widespread and often believed stories about the 'loony left', 'Baa baa green sheep' and so on. Very early on in the Home Office project on which I was employed to combat racism in predominantly white schools, my then colleague, Kamaljeet Virdee, and I were assailed by attacks in the national press.

Particularly memorable is Jill Knight MP naming me as a lunatic in a *Daily Mail* article, attacking the whole idea that there was a need for anti-racist strategies in predominantly white schools.

Although the head teachers were gatekeepers in the schools we worked in, LEAs had a great deal more power than they do now to mandate training. In some schools there was hostility, in others we were welcomed with open arms. In one, the Head was unwilling to have us there, but the other teaching staff were very keen on the idea ... and prevailed.

Alison: Yes, the challenges were, I think, not unique to these issues, but similar to many situations where experienced professionals are challenged to rethink some aspect of their practice. Sometimes, as 'outsiders', we could propose ideas that some teachers were glad to see raised, but that would have been difficult for them to voice among their colleagues.

Debbie: One of the things we had to work at was finding ways of challenging fixed ideas without alienating the people we were trying to persuade. When we developed ***'Where it really matters ...'*** we wanted to think with the teachers and children we worked with and not to corner them or force confessions.

One incident I remember and found funny, but which possibly points to some dawning realisation, was the headteacher who said to us after a session with primary school heads in part of Birmingham, ***'We've only got one multicultural child in our school, but she's so middle class we don't notice'***.

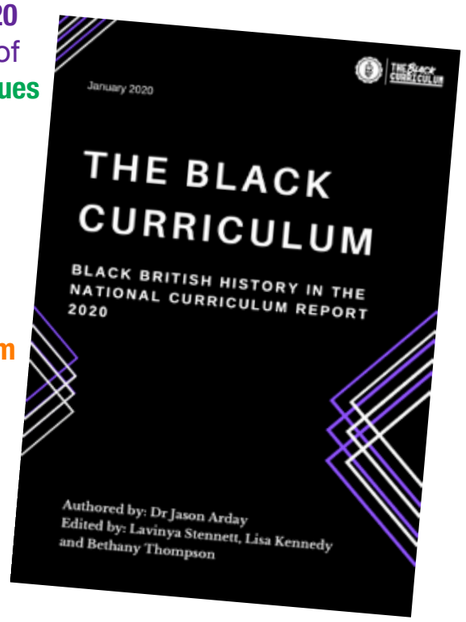
4. Do you get the impression that these debates are still relevant?

Alison: There are reports in the news now, such as this article by a teacher grappling with how to discuss racism in her class of mainly white students.

Thanks to recent restrictions by the government [see for example], she is facing *"the dilemma of how to teach vitally important concepts without breaking government guidance"*.

> **As a teacher I need to be able to talk about racism without government meddling**
>
> The Guardian 19 Nov 2020

Another recent report, **The Black Curriculum Report 2020** deplores the omission from the national curriculum of black British history. So **I sometimes wonder if the issues we were dealing with in the 1990s have improved at all.**



> **"During this particularly factious time within our societal history, the need for a curriculum that redefines conceptions of 'Britishness' and how this aligns to our values and identities is integral towards developing an inclusive classroom that establishes belonging in the curriculum."**
>
> *From - The Black Curriculum Report*

Debbie: Teachers are under a lot of pressure in all sorts of ways. I certainly think the debates are relevant and that it's harder to take them into schools, not only because of government guidance, but because of the pressures of the National Curriculum, of constant surveillance and of testing.

However **I think it's a more complex picture than 'nothing has changed'** because things seem to have changed both for the worse and for the better. The recent **government guidance** is a terrible mishmash of issues that are really quite different from each other. **But I do agree with the sections indicating children's need to develop critical thinking, and the critique of the National Curriculum for omitting Black British history is well made.** So there is much that hasn't stood still.

5. What are your views about priority challenges for education now?

Debbie: There are so many challenges!

Certainly, I think that questions of race and racism need addressing. But the key challenges may be to help children and young people develop the skills of critical thinking, especially in relation to social media.

There have always been problems about bullying in schools (and elsewhere) **but very dangerous now is a culture, both on- and off-line, that encourages people to threaten, belittle and name-call those they disagree with, rather than listening to and discussing other points of view.**

I think that this is a huge priority because we can't make progress on anything that is potentially contentious or difficult if we can't get beyond that.

Alison: I agree. In the decades since we worked on that project, it seems to me that **'education' has been compressed by politicians, with excessive prescription and testing of minutiae at the expense of creativity, imagination and independent, critical thinking.**

Thankfully there is always resistance and scope for debates to be opened up. These debates won't go away!

Debbie: Yes, when I see so many young white and black people protesting in relation to Black Lives Matter, I think that in their schools, their homes and in the mass media **maybe something positive and progressive is actually happening.**

From ET [1] Black Lives Matter in Middlesbrough - one of many demonstrations all over the world.

See for example from ET [1]
Cathryn Gathercole's article
Andrew Simon's article

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Not surprisingly the ideas and issues Debbie and Alison have highlighted introduce those featured in other articles in this Elephant Times.

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