

This is not the piece I was commissioned to write

The commission was something else. I wrote the proposal for it in the week the Education Select Committee put out their report on the underachievement of the White Working Class in schools. It was also the week that I dealt with several racist incidents in my day job as a teacher. And it was the week that a young boy told me, "This school is all about the Blacks now. You don't care about white people."

This is what the Education Select Committee wrote:

The Committee agreed with the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities that discourse around the term 'White Privilege' can be divisive, and that disadvantage should be discussed without pitting different groups against each other.

This is the headline in the newspaper article in the Sun written by the chair of the Education Select Committee on the day the report was published:

White privilege is just a MYTH to 1 million white, working-class kids

This is what my student also told me later that week:

If there was an accident and a black and a white person were injured, and there was only one ambulance, the ambulance HAS to go to the black person.

I'd rather not write about this. I'm not comfortable with it. I might get it wrong. I think I already have.

But every day I hear kids saying things they don't understand. I hear them echoing the language they hear on the news and in the papers, and on tiktok, and on youtube. I hear them doing this in an area where the far-right has a regular presence, and where poverty looks white. I hear them use words that scare me, and yet I also hear them use them in the way kids always use words – to wound, to get revenge, to get a laugh.

Some kids tell me that to be called these things is part of the fabric of their lives.

Then I hear the people who want to fix this – myself included – say things that are not understood, or are not clear. When I talk to the kids, and hear their explanations and accounts spiral into complexity, muddled by their own lack of knowledge and the many ways children are always horrible to each other, I hear the voice inside me going *what the fuck do I do about this? What can I say? Because what I am saying isn't working.*

After I finished the piece I was commissioned to write, I showed it to people, asking if it was OK. Not if it was good, but if it was acceptable. I wrote this – am writing this – as part of that process, because I cannot decide if I should send it in or not. If you end up reading it, it's because people I trust have reassured me (don't let me down, people).

But as I write, there is one really clear thing in my mind. I do, honestly, believe that there are cynical or misguided attempts to use the idea of a culture war, or a 'war on woke', for political gain, and I feel like I have seen the seeds of this sprout in my classroom. I'm frightened because I don't think we properly understand either the danger, or the danger of responding in ways that deepen the division further. The Education Select Committee was right – this discourse is divisive. It was all the more upsetting then to hear them use (and misuse) the terms they label as divisive in a tabloid article.

We are a racist society. We are also a classist society, and a society crippled by inequality. And we're a society that seems locked into an argument that is slowly driving us even further apart.

This is the piece I was commissioned to write. It's fiction, and should not be mistaken for an account of a specific incident, but the language used is taken from a twenty year career in schools, and I've heard it all.

What Happened During Period Three

I needed to go to the toilet but miss wouldn't let me so I went, and when I came back she wasn't there. I don't know where she went.

Reece was calling me, and he kept saying 'die', so I told the teacher, and she didn't do nothing, so I told him 'die', and he threw a rubber at me so I told him to fuck off and the teacher told me to get out so I did and then you found me.

I didn't see what happened. I was doing my work, and I heard people saying things, but I was doing my work so I didn't see what happened.

At the start of the lesson I was laughing, only it wasn't at the teacher. I was laughing because of what Fergus said. And then when the teacher came in, and she said she was our supply teacher, she thought I was laughing at her – only I really wasn't. So when she asked me to stop, I did, but some other people thought it was funny the way she said it. I didn't mean to laugh again, but she did have a funny accent. And then Jack did her accent, and it was funny, so I laughed again, but then she said I was racist. And I really wasn't being racist. I know what she thought, but I wasn't – I was just laughing because it's hard not to laugh when someone does an accent.

Re: D5, period 3

I visited the room about ten minutes into the lesson. The class were disruptive, and hadn't started work. The supply teacher hadn't handed the books out yet. I spoke to Fergus and Nico about laughing at her, and we discussed being respectful. The class started work and I left.

The thing is we weren't being racist. We were talking about racism. She said Nico was racist because he laughed when Jack did her accent, and I was like, 'people always do accents and laugh at them.' Doing accents isn't racist. If doing accents was

racist people would be being racist towards people from Liverpool all the time, or people from London when they say 'Oi.'

I was only checking my phone for the time and miss took it. It was only because the lesson was boring.

She said 'bambaclat' was racist against her, but 'bambaclat' just means bum.

Dear sir,

I was very disturbed to hear from Fergus about the lesson today. The supply teacher seems to have accused most people in the class of being racist, and I need to object in the strongest terms. Far from being racist, Fergus is extremely sensitive to these things. It was not his fault that the teacher could not control the class, and allowed them to become actively dangerous. I understand that Fergus is to receive a consequence after school – he will not be staying for this.

Can I also add that as a school I think you should be very careful of labelling children as racist. They have grown up in an area without much diversity, and sometimes simply respond to difference. That does not make them prejudiced. Just because they do not know the latest buzz words, and the cultural connotations of every term, they do not deserve to have their names blackened.

I have copied in the chair of governors.

I didn't do anything. I thought it was French period 3, so I hid in the toilet.

Dear sir,

I was very disturbed to hear from Alice about the lesson today. From what she says, it sounds like there is a culture of racism at the school. I was really shocked to hear some of the comments students had made, and that they had been mocking the accent of the supply teacher. I know that there is a lack of diversity in this area, and that some of the families come from backgrounds that can foster right wing views, and I think the school needs to do some serious work in de-radicalising the discourse.

I attach an article from the guardian that might be of interest.

I didn't like the way they were with the teacher, but she was also quite unfair. I think Jenny is a racist, but I don't think Nico is. Fergus might be half a racist. My mum says that you can be racist to white people anyway, and on tiktok it said that if a black person and a white person was injured in an accident and there was only one ambulance, the ambulance has to go to the black person, and I don't think that's right.

Re: D5, period 3

I visited the classroom about half way through the lesson. It was a tricky situation. The supply teacher did not have good control, and her accent made it hard for the students to understand her instructions. She seemed to have accused some of them in the class of racism, and they had taken against her. I settled them, and we made sure that everyone had their books out and was sitting in the right place.

Jonny drew a picture of a penis on my book so I stuck a compass point in the back of his hand.

Reece asked Syeda out and she said she couldn't go out with him even though she fancied him, so he got his mates to shout paki and currymuncher at her. It's not being racist, it's just because it annoys her. When Reece called her dark chocolate, she called him white chocolate, so it's not racism.

Jackson called me gay, so I told him to fuck off because gays aren't allowed in my religion.

First, the teacher was very disrespectful to Alice, and she was saying things like 'Alice, you need to face the front,' when Alice was already facing the front. So I was like 'Miss, Alice is already facing the front', and she got really angry, only I couldn't tell what she was saying because of her accent, so I said 'Miss, I can't tell what you're saying because of your accent', and the teacher said I was being disrespectful, only I wasn't, you really couldn't hear her accent, so I asked Alice what she was saying and the teacher told me to get out, only I hadn't done anything, I'd only asked Alice, so I didn't get out and then she came over to me and she hit me on the back of the hand so I was like, 'you can't hit me' and she said to get out again, and she snatched my phone and broke it so I told her to fuck off you black cunt.

I don't even know why that teacher was here. She can't speak English properly. How can she teach us if she can't speak English properly?

Syeda is always telling people I have no dick. She literally says it the whole time. She says I have no dick, and then she says I'm like a girl, and she's always saying it in front of other people, so I called her a paki.

Re: JK

JK made a disclosure at 12.20, when she was with me in my office after she had been removed from lessons for racial abuse of the supply teacher during period 3. She asked me not to contact home because she was worried about her father. Her phone screen had cracked when the supply teacher took it off her, and she didn't want her father to know. When she told me she seemed very distressed. I was aware there is an active Child Protection file on JK. I passed this information on to the designated safeguarding lead.

My mum says it's racist of you to call me racist. She says white people don't get a fair chance nowadays, because of white privilege. Everyone always talks about black

people. This whole school's about black people. She says people are wanting to erase Churchill, and pull down the queen. She says she's sick of people going on about George Floyd because George Floyd was a criminal, and I can wear my trainers because my other shoes give me blisters.

Re: D5 period 3

The office informed me that the teacher had left, so I went up to the class. I settled them down, and asked them to write their accounts of what had happened in the lesson. They were quite upset about the whole thing – I think the word racist had been used a lot. I think it all got out of hand – they're a good class, and other teachers don't seem to have problems with them. I've put some consequences in place and think we should do an assembly on tolerance next week – there's an excellent clip about George Floyd we can use, and maybe we can get some of the non-white students to talk about their experiences.

I was thinking about setting up a diversity group. Maybe that would help. They could have time-out cards if there was anything triggering. And it's probably worth not using the same supply teacher again – I'm not sure she copes well with our students.

After the lesson, when I walked over to the restaurant, someone behind me shouted 'Allah-hu-akbar'. They do it all the time. I don't know who it is. They've done it since year 7. I can't tell my dad. I don't want you to say anything. Nothing's going to change.

That was the piece I was commissioned to write. After I finished it, while I sent it round to all the people I knew who might advise me on it, I thought about my tree.

It sounds strange to say 'my tree', but that's what it is. It even has a label – it says 'Sammy's apple tree'. It was given to me, five years ago, by the first year group that passed through the Sixth Form I set up.

They gave me a tree because they said I was obsessed with apples. I had an assembly I kept giving them all about how they shouldn't think of the short term – the grades they might get. Those were just the fruit. You can get bad fruit, I said, or good. But even good fruit doesn't last.

Trees do.

That's the point. Education isn't just about the apples – it's about looking after the whole tree. You're not just getting to an end point. How you get there matters, because how you get there - the things you say, the ways you interact – becomes the grain of your life, the stuff of your self. How we talk, and how we are, will bear fruit, sooner or later, good or bad.

This isn't what I set out to write. But there are apples on that tree, now.

