**Child Q – How can African and Caribbean children be safeguarded?**

**Facing the challenge of belief and value-driven decision-making.**

**Monday 20th June 2022**

**Eventbrite Abstract**

**London South Bank University (LSBU)** - Institute of Health and Social Care **are proud to deliver what promises to be a safeguarding conference with a difference. Usually, discussions about safeguarding focus on the harm caused to children by their parents or guardians. However, for Child Q, the harm caused to her involved professionals, those in loco parentis, who were tasked to protect. Instead, they caused her physical, emotional and sexual harm.**

Despite the outcrying of those from African and Caribbean descent over decades, about the overt and subtle forms of racism they and their children experience at the hands of individuals and institutions, their voices have often not been truly heard. All too often silenced by platitudes of unconscious bias and projections that blame the victims rather than the perpetrators of racist practices.

This conference aims to provide an opportunity for African and Caribbean professionals from education, health, the police and social work – to offer an alternative perspective to the problem, and to share ideas for how the institutions that African and Caribbean children and young people attend when they leave the sanctity of their own homes should protect, nurture and develop them.

The conference is open to all with an interest & passion in this area - parents, social workers, social work students, designated school safeguarding leads, designated health safeguarding leads (hospitals and community), police, etc...

**Introduction & context**

**The UK must learn from the harrowing case of Child Q and move on from the legacy of slavery and a colonial mindset.**

I would like to thank you all for attending today. I feel privileged to have been able to organise this Child Q conference, and to have 1000 attendees at what promises to be a thought-provoking event. I also want to thank LSBU for supporting the conference, especially the Event Manager, Neil, for his expertise, and the Dean for funding support. Special thanks must also go to my colleague and mentor, Denise, for being my sounding board, as well as students, Gerri Vassell and Presly-Monique Kiemba, for their social media expertise. And, finally, a big thank-you to our guest speakers and group facilitators.

Much has been written about the fact that so many Black - and especially Black Caribbean – children leave the UK’s education system significantly behind their peers. Why should this be the case? After all, there is no evidence that Black children are inherently less able than other children.

In recent decades, considerable effort has gone into addressing this question, and the cause is usually attributed to institutional racism and unconscious bias. But, although such explanations have their place, they do not go far enough. While socio-economic disadvantage unarguably exists, it exists for many ethnic groups. Why should the situation be worse for Black Caribbean children?

The truth is, that attitudes towards Black people are still rooted in the 19th Century. The legacy of the UK’s colonial past is such that those from the Caribbean are, subconsciously, still viewed as slaves: as property to be traded. So, from the moment Black children are placed in UK institutions, they are at risk, as was so clearly - and deplorably - demonstrated in the recent case of Child Q. To correct this situation, the UK’s educational institutions must adjust their pedagogy to encourage and enable white professionals to be aware of their biases towards Black children. Only then will the UK begin the climb towards a truly equal society.

KEYWORDS***:*****Racism Black African and Caribbean children, Values, beliefs, and decision-making**

First, I’m aware that many people do not like that she is called Child Q. But, for me, it is appropriate to afford her anonymity. As a social worker of 32 years, I believe that she would be significantly traumatised by her experience, and none of us know how she will deal with it in the years to come. What we do know, however, is that she will need time, space and support to heal. Our responsibility is to remember that, although her identity has been reduced to a single initial, we must never forget her.

It was, of course, a shameful racist incident. Yet it is important to note that no laws were broken. The teachers and police officers concerned acted as they did because they did not see Child Q as a teenager living in 2020; instead, they appear to have seen her as a slave girl from 18204. In those days, ‘whites’ would have viewed her as property; an ‘item’ to be sold at auction. And, as such, she would have been pulled and prodded, her arms and breasts felt to see if she was strong enough. Such a child would never have been allowed an education, as such a course would have given her ideas above her station.

Now jump forward 200 years, to the UK, 2020. Teachers and police officers decided to take Child Q out of an exam and strip-search her for drugs, though none were found. According to *The Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review*: *Child Q*, the decision was based on her colour, ‘The review believes there to be a high level of probability that practitioners were influenced in this regard. The disproportionate decision to strip search Child Q is unlikely to have been disconnected from her ethnicity and her background as a child growing up on an estate in Hackney.’ The parallels with 1820 are disturbing. We seem to have progressed very little.

**My truth**

I come from an African and Caribbean tradition of narrative storytelling. It therefore seems appropriate to open by sharing my value base and belief system.

I is black

I is a woman

I is an older sister

I is a godmother

I is a mother

I is a auntie

I is a widow

I am a social worker

I am a colleague

I am a fostering panel chair

I am a Service Manager

I am a trainer

I am an academic

I am a lecturer

I started my narrative in what is commonly known as a patois, because it is important for people to connect me to all my identities, as I do myself. It is also important for you to hear me say, in the words of Maya Angelou: I am a phenomenal woman. I love my curves. I love my lips. I have never wanted to be anything other than black. But you also need to understand that when I leave this institution, where I work as a part-time senior lecturer, people do not see Dr Weekes, they see a Black woman. Examples of my experience are:

* People grabbing their bags when I’m on the train.
* Shop assistants following me around the store.

On a good day, I say nothing. But if you catch me on a bad day, I will point out to them that I probably earn more money than they do; or I will walk around the store and touch everything – but not buy a thing. My experiences mirror the experiences of thousands upon thousands of Black people!

**Effective Personal & Professional Judgement theory**

My curiosity about how people’s background affects their thinking resulted in my PhD research on the complexities of decision-making by adoption and fostering panels. However, the conclusions of this research extend well beyond the parameters of adoption and fostering panels - the findings apply to decision-making in all arenas. In fact, I developed a process of self-awareness enhancement called Effective Personal and Professional Judgement (EPPJ). As you can see from the #(hashtag) above, it carries the strapline ‘Increased personal awareness increases professional effectiveness’.

My students will testify that, in the *Readiness to Direct Practice* module, they have learned that being an effective social work professional means understanding what informs their own thinking and decision-making. For how can they affect change in others, unless they know themselves?

Looking at the Child Q case through the lens of EPPJ, an obvious hypothesis suggests itself: that the belief and value systems of the teachers and police officers involved in the incident were such that they failed to see child Q as a teenager sitting an exam. This flawed thinking led to flawed decision-making. Their belief, strongly influenced by Child Q’s skin colour, that she was in possession of drugs, led to her removal from the exam room. The fact that she was menstruating did not affect their decision. When no drugs were found, they sent her back to the exam room, and eventually home, as though such treatment was routine.

As a social work practitioner, I have spent years involved in safeguarding. I have met many teachers and police officers, who, had they heard that a parent had treated their own child as Child Q had been treated, for similar reasons, those same professionals would have recommended that the child concerned be subjected to a child protection plan. They would expect that the parent would need to undergo training, to help them change their parenting style. Professionals would then assess the parent to determine whether they were capable of parenting their own child.

**From theory to practice**

But, when it is police officers and teachers themselves who stand accused of subjecting a child to sexual, emotional and physical abuse, things seem to be different. Today, we are told that the police will do their own investigation into the Child Q incident, and Hackney Council will take no action before this is complete. Ring any bells? Following the murder of their son in 1993, Neville and Doreen Lawrence, had to wait 6 years for the Macpherson Report (the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry) to be published in 1999. This uncovered major failings in the police investigation and defined the term ‘institutional racism’.

My aim for this conference is to provide an opportunity to ‘Explore how African and Caribbean Children can be safeguarded’. It is, essentially, a call for, and to, action. I make no apology for the fact that the conference is not an All Children Matter conference, and that its focus is, unashamedly, on black children. Nor can I apologise for the fact that all speakers are black academics and professionals. This is because the black community has its own views on what the system is doing to our children, and why. We are tired of hearing from white academics or professionals about the black experience.

The audience, however, is ethnically mixed. This suggest that the desire to change the experience of Black children extends beyond the Black community. There are many non-black people who want the same thing.

While today’s speakers have much to say, I would like this conference to be more than an opportunity to listen – or, or as my mother would say, ‘pick the words out of our mouths’. As well as getting answers to their questions, I would like all attendees to think about what they can do themselves, and what they can ask – or even compel - their organisations to do.

What happened to Child Q should not have happened. It was inexcusable. But, as a Christian, two bible verses come to mind, both of which have played a big part in galvanising me into action. They are:

*Genesis 50:20 You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.*

*Esther 4: 14.  And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?”*

I believe that the harrowing case of Child Q will catalyse change for African and Caribbean children. And, as a social work practitioner, researcher and lecturer, I believe I have been afforded the opportunity to influence the practice of future social workers. So, if you want to study social work - come to LSBU where we are beginning to explore such subjects. Alternatively, if you are a practitioner in any profession, consider attending our CPD courses. Finally, please do all you can to encourage your organisation to fund research on race issues, so we can challenge, reduce - and eventually eradicate - racist practices.

**Conclusion**

The research and thinking described in this conference/paper are just the start of the conversation. Further research is needed to examine the belief and value systems at play in professionals who have, by default, a significant role in determining the life chances of Black African and Caribbean children.

There is, of course, no overnight fix to this situation. But there are definable and achievable actions that can be taken as first steps in a long-term remedy. One of these actions, and probably the most effective, is to encourage and enable white people, from doctors and shop owners to police and teachers, to be aware of their biases towards Black Caribbean people. The aim should be to redefine expectations of the Black community in terms of academic abilities and performance, and to break the default assumptions that connect race and deviant behaviour. Abuses, such as the disproportionate levels of exclusion and adultification of children, racial profiling7 and labelling, incarceration of Black males in prison and mental institutions, and the poor treatment of black Caribbean and African pregnant women should become a thing of the past.

To effect change will require the UK to adjust the structural framework of its pedagogy. The curriculum of all learning institutions must be made to be culturally relevant for Black people, using the appropriate language and terminology8, which will be beneficial for all to combat racism. In these new curricula, topics such as the history of UK’s involvement in the slave trade, the reasons why Caribbeans came to the UK after WW2, and the contribution of non-Europeans to the world, across every aspect of society, would have a significant role to play. Only then will the UK begin to be an equal society.

As a final note, given my research interests, I will later be facilitating the group ‘*How do values and beliefs shape decision-making around safeguarding?’*

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