



"Trust me as your child's teacher. Respect me as a black man"

School teacher Craig Cunningham explains why he made a viral video aimed at highlighting the contradictory stereotypes black men face

Craig Cunningham

10 July 2020 • 12:23pm

As a black teacher in Britain, I've seen at first hand the complex and confusing stereotypes that are projected onto men like me. When I'm at school, I'm respected as an educator, trusted with the futures of our children; but when I walk out onto the street, I'm subject to the same dehumanising prejudices that black people in this country face.

I've been thinking about this contradiction a lot recently, prompted by the ongoing incidents relating to racial inequality. Last week, I decided to act: I pulled together a group of black male teachers and asked them to video themselves first wearing the clothes they teach in, and then a hoodie. The idea was to juxtapose the way we are seen when inside and out of school.

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I reached out to a couple of teachers to try and articulate the impact of our ongoing situation, we ended up with this! Credit to [@MisterJosephs](#) [@KojoHazel](#) [@Mister_DGee](#) [@ActiveYouthUK](#) [@Shepherd_E27](#) [@OfficialJeffreyBrew](#) [@MrBradePE](#) [#BlackLivesMatters](#) [#BlackMaleEducators](#) [#teachers](#) [pic.twitter.com/XKcQ9K6kBX](#)

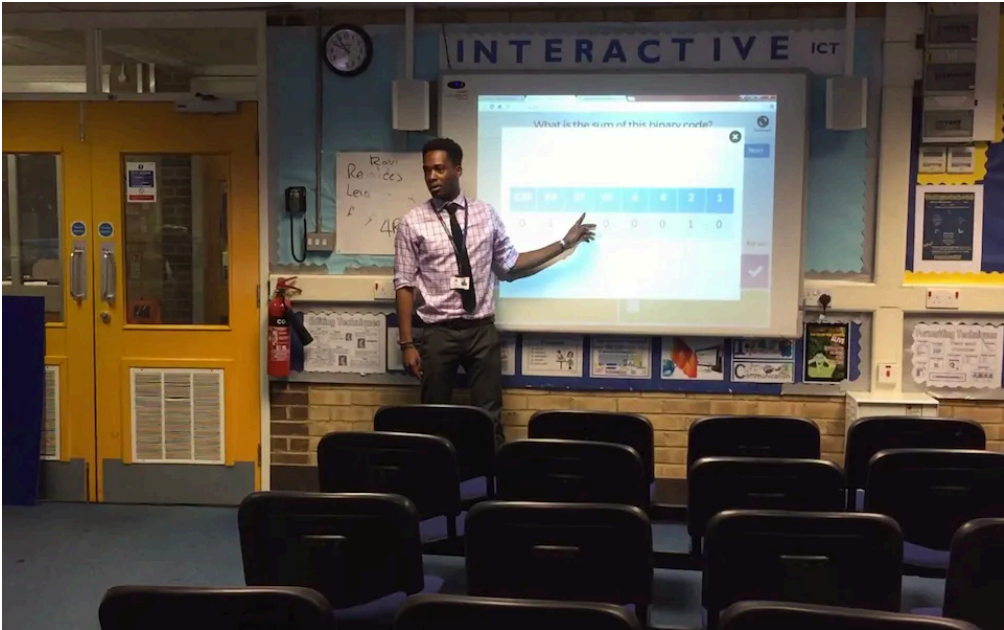
— Craig Cunningham (@MrCunninghamEDU) [June 29, 2020](#)

Of course, one video doesn't change a society – there's still so much work to do to level up the experiences of black people, in the UK and around the world. As a teacher, I believe we can start that work in schools.

I'm a second-generation Jamaican who grew up in the Midlands in the late 80s and 90s. At school, there were about 30 or 40 black children in my year group. We mixed with the rest of the year group, but we were also quite segregated. We kept together because we shared a common experience, but as I've grown as a black man, I've become more aware of my perceived position in society. It does a lot to you, it makes you apprehensive and makes you want to fight against it all at the same time.

I started in this job six-and-a-half years ago, at the age of 30. It was a daunting career change: before, I was on a pretty decent salary as a graphic designer in the City. I did that for six years, but I just wasn't fulfilled by it. I was doing all this creative work and not really seeing or feeling like I was having a positive impact. So I completely changed track.

Now, I can give my students something that I didn't have when I was at school: a positive black role model inside of a school setting. Today, when black children look at me in the classroom, I know they can see themselves in me. I can use my presences as an empowerment tool.



Every day presents a new challenge that can either break you or make you, says Cunningham | CREDIT: Craig Cunningham

There's a long way to go on this front. Schools have about 86pc white teachers, and 4pc black. If you look at the breakdown by gender, there are more black female teachers than there are black male teachers. Perhaps that's a result of how black boys were treated in schools in the past.

The death of George Floyd has activated black teachers to speak about the need to decolonise the curriculum. It's not just about having a history lesson where we look into black British history and the migration of black Britons, there needs to be work done by all subject teachers to see how positive representation can be translated into a classroom setting. Right above my desk, I have six or seven pictures of different black computer

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scientists who have been instrumental in their field. It's powerful, being able to see yourself in another person's achievements, contributions and work.

If I'm going to walk through the door as a black teacher, I'm not closing that door behind me. I need to make sure that I'm propping it open so I can pull the next person in, and they can do the same. That's why, in the video we made, we said: Trust me as your child's teacher. Respect me as a black man. We've got to be agents of change, and empower other black men to come into the profession.

As told to *Yolanthe Fawehinmi*


Craig Cunningham is a 36-year-old computer science teacher and assistant head teacher. [Follow him on Twitter](#)


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
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
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