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Citizenship in mainly white schools: the marginalisation of the minority ethnic voice

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Setting the Scene

No Problem Here (Gaine, 1987) examined minority ethnic children's experiences of racial exclusion in a majority white British county. The book's title reflected Gaine's observations on the frequent use of this phrase in response to the minority ethnic presence. The underlying assumption was that because there were few minority ethnic children in the county, there would not be any problems with issues that their presence might raise. Eight years later Gaine returned to the same theme in *Still No Problem Here* (1995) and found that attitudes had not fundamentally altered in the intervening years.

My research into the area of race and citizenship in the same county began during at a time when many issues relating to diversity were being raised as a result of the recommendations of the Macpherson Report. This Report was produced in 1999, following the racist murder of the black teenager, Stephen Lawrence in 1993. The Report produced quite specific recommendations on the role of education in the prevention of racism, but two years after the Report the implications of its recommendations had not become a reality for many schools in the county. I was trying to discover whether the implications of the Macpherson Report, together with the compulsory introduction of citizenship teaching in all secondary schools from 2002, were about to change this pattern of neglect.

Isolated identities

This rural county has small numbers of minority ethnic people. This situation is reflected in the numbers of minority ethnic children attending the county's schools: OfSTED (the English schools' inspection agency - Office for Standards in Education) reported (2002) that only 1.5 per cent of the county's pupils are of minority ethnic origin, compared with the national figure of 12 per cent. In a school of approximately 700 children, only seven or eight will be of minority ethnic or dual heritage background. Moreover, in schools not situated in the county towns, the minority ethnic pupils do not share a common 'racial' or ethnic homogeneity, but often come from widely varying backgrounds and heritage.

My interviews with minority ethnic children in secondary school showed children often expressing concern that their individual identities be recognised and respected. They did not want to be 'lumped together' as one homogeneous body in the minds of their peers, teachers and the local community, simply on the grounds of their difference from the white majority population. At the same time, these children did feel themselves to be linked in some ways by the nature of their social experience of exclusion within the community. This has made necessary for them to develop certain 'coping' mechanisms and ways of 'managing' their feelings of isolation, in order to survive and function in their environment. The children all spoke of having to be 'strong' to survive the racism and exclusion they have experienced, and the comment was made that '...things have happened that have made us closer.' Their feelings were of isolated identities within a

majority white community, an experience highlighted by Bhikhu Parekh when he pointed out that,

Although equal citizenship is essential to fostering a common sense of belonging, it is not enough. Citizenship is about status and rights, belonging is about being accepted and feeling welcome. Some individuals and groups might enjoy the same rights as the rest but feel that they do not quite belong to the community, nor it to them. This feeling of being full citizens and yet outsiders is difficult to analyze and explain, but it can be deep and real and seriously damage the quality of their citizenship ... (Parekh, 2000, p342)

During many interviews my attention was been drawn to this very quality of their citizenship; the feeling that they 'do not quite belong to the community, nor it to them'.

Initial approaches

I approached a selection of the county's schools individually as a lone researcher representing my university's Inclusion Policy Research Centre. My letter of introduction gave my aim as to find information about the experiences of minority ethnic pupils in the county in relation to the new statutory citizenship requirements in secondary schools. It also offered to introduce a web-based anti-racist resource that had been designed specifically to be used in majority white areas by children with little contact experience of diversity.¹ At the time this letter was sent in late 2000 secondary schools were investing energy into trying to understand what the new citizenship education legislation would mean for their school curriculum. Many were struggling to interpret exactly what a 'light touch' curriculum (a term coined by Education Secretary David Blunkett) meant in practice. In speaking of the new citizenship Order, Bernard Crick who chaired the Citizenship Advisory Group, has written,

So it is a flexible Order. David Blunkett likes to say a "light touch", which I gloss as "strong bare bones", with plenty of room in it for human rights, global citizenship and race relations programmes. Different schools will have or see different possibilities. Very sensibly the Government had no wish to prescribe in detail in this subject what should be taught and how. ... So a flexible curriculum, albeit each school will have to produce one to be assessed internally, and will be publicly accountable both to governing bodies and to OfSTED inspection. (Crick, 2000)

This is a concept-rich statement, and one that sets out all the reasons behind certain anxieties that the interpretation of the new citizenship order was very clearly causing for many schools. These anxieties were reflected in the responses I received, which suggested that the schools were disinclined to allow a researcher to record observations about an area in which they themselves were still attempting to understand the implications. At this stage, the 'light touch', intended to offer flexibility of interpretation to schools, had not been converted into the 'strong bare bones' that educators needed in order to turn an abstract idea into school policy and practical classroom activity. The subject was broad and diverse, and the energy needed to mobilise school response

¹ www.britkid.org

considerable, which further increased anxieties concerning assessment and inspection. In addition to all these factors, I was asking for access to information about cultural diversity, an area that had, in the county's recent history, been treated at worst defensively, and at best, as an irrelevance. My letter of introduction prompted a creative range of responses centred around the basic response 'No'.

Eventual Access

I eventually secured access to secondary schools through EMAS, the county's Ethnic Minority Achievement Service at the LEA (Local Education Authority), whose principal task is the provision of support in the English language to minority ethnic children. Although they very positively subscribe to anti-racist initiatives in education, they have neither the time nor the resources to assist schools in this area. They therefore directed me to make contact with a school inspector at the LEA who had been assigned the task of responding to issues raised in schools by the recommendations of the Macpherson Report. This role had evolved as an 'add-on' to his full-time job as school inspector, mainly as a result of his personal commitment to the promotion of anti-racist and human rights education. He was himself from a minority ethnic group, and lived and worked in a white majority environment.

The inspector wanted to encourage schools to take anti-racist initiatives in the direction of more general human rights and equal opportunities, and felt strongly that in advising teachers on the relevant issues concerning the promotion of an anti-racist curriculum, a broader range of perspectives should be introduced. Therefore, during the training sessions he had quite recently begun to conduct, he made sure that international treaties, recommendations and declarations were introduced in order to demonstrate that the imperatives of the Macpherson Report were the 'tip of the iceberg', and that a hidden depth of supporting international history existed. He also felt that this approach was tactical, less confrontational, and therefore less likely to provoke cries of 'irrelevant' with regard to anti-racist education in a mainly white teaching area. It should be noted that these sessions were often poorly attended, and in some cases were cancelled due to lack of response. His own experiences also played a part in the decision to recommend this approach: he had found that having attention focused exclusively on 'racial' difference both provokes sensitivity on the part of minority ethnic people, and also tends to obscure the more general but equally valid issues of human rights and equal opportunities. The inspector did however, strongly support early practical anti-racist initiatives that were beginning to take place in schools, such as the requirement to keep and maintain a racist incident log book.

My impression from the schools that I visited throughout the county was that teachers have been unwilling to recognise the marginalisation experienced by their minority ethnic pupils, and the implications that this has for their experience of being young citizens in a majority white environment. Time and again teachers have described to me projects relating to themes of multi-cultural or global citizenship and human rights, while remaining unaware of the isolating experiences that their minority ethnic pupils face every day. One criticism of a human-rights approach to anti-racism might be therefore, that it gives further opportunity for the real everyday experience of racism to be left unaddressed. This situation produces a double-edged predicament for the county. On the one hand direct promotion of anti-racist initiatives often results in the defensive response that the subject is not relevant. On the other, more general approaches run the risk of

allowing real issues of experienced racism and isolation to be marginalised, and that the broader principles of human rights and democracy remain disconnected from the practical situations faced by minority ethnic children. A further complication is the fact that these children often do experience great sensitivity when issues of racism are addressed in the classroom, and may themselves prefer an approach which they feel is less confrontational.

Recent Developments

The general feeling within schools is succinctly expressed in Gaine's title *No Problem Here*. The minority ethnic however have been explicit in expressing their experiences of racism and isolation, and it would appear from these experiences that the consciousness of what it means to be a secondary school pupil is still primarily a white majority consciousness. Furthermore, following inspection, OfSTED commented that the LEA response to tackling issues of diversity post-Macpherson, had been 'singularly tardy' (OfSTED, 2002).

Prior to recent well-defined legislation, few resources have been directed towards these issues, and when these issues *have* been prioritised through the facilitation of teacher-training seminars, the attendance has been so poor that sessions have had to be cancelled. The resulting logic of this situation has been to allocate even fewer resources due to lack of response. Lack of response has been treated as a rationale supporting the development of resource allocation, rather than as a symptom of a seriously flawed countywide consciousness.

Recent developments in legislation however, have shown early signs of changing the direction in which the county's schools are headed with regard to anti-racist practice. As a result of the Race Relations Act (1976) and the Race Relations Amendment Act (2000), the recently produced draft consultation guide from the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) of a statutory code of practice on the duty to promote race equality in schools has had a galvanising effect. The code will be admissible as evidence in any legal proceedings under the Race Relations Act, and amongst other requirements, a duty has been placed upon each school to produce a race equality policy by the end of May 2002. With this requirement specifically in mind, the LEA have organised a countywide racial equality project which will disseminate relevant information at multiple locations over a two-month period. This project is to be further extended over the next two years, and will involve work with pilot schools and head teachers. Early indicators of attendance at the initial seminars have been mildly encouraging, and schools are beginning to contact the LEA for information that, they are beginning to realise, they need to know.

The initial behavioural response to legislation has been clear; whether this can be sustained in order to produce a fundamental change in attitude remains to be seen. The action planned involves people who have been temporarily seconded from their full-time work, without any extra time being awarded for the secondment. The only exception to this has been the award of a temporary contract for the duration of the initiative to a representative from the county's Racial Equality Council. This contract is minimally part-time, and allows only approximate thirty working days for each of the two years that the project will run. Due to funding restrictions, the creation of a full-time position addressing post-Macpherson initiatives has been shelved indefinitely. The term 'anti-racism on a shoestring' springs to mind.

As for the dialectical debate regarding human rights and anti-racism, Carolyn Hamilton, the Director of the Children's Legal Centre, has pointed out that under Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, schools have a responsibility not only to deal with racist incidents but also to prepare pupils for life in a multicultural and multiracial world (Hamilton, 1999). This directive points in the direction of a possible solution. If legislation can contribute to an unequivocal anti-racist infrastructure within schools, then curriculum is given the freedom to deal with the broader concerns of developing an education for the promotion of human rights and racial equality. At the same time attention may be given to the requirements of a specific anti-racist directive in the curriculum depending upon the needs and sensitivity of the particular school environment and its pupils. The orientation of the therapy is both behavioural and cognitive - the way you *do* things and the way you *think about* things (MacLiam, 2002). It is holistic, and neither is privileged at the expense of the other.

Conclusion

What seems to have emerged in this mainly white county is that legislation for the teaching of citizenship alone has not produced the more specific response of increasing awareness of the feelings and experiences of the minority ethnic school population. The legislation has instead initiated more general responses, which have failed to take into account the feelings, needs and experiences of these students. The impetus necessary for drawing attention to their needs as young minority ethnic citizens has instead been provided by specific legislation on the commitment by each school to produce an effective and dedicated anti-racist policy. The hope is that this specific directive will provide the catalyst for a greater awareness of the citizenship needs of the county's minority ethnic pupils.

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