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Improving opportunity, strengthening society: government policy, children's voices

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Introduction

In January 2005 the British government published *Improving Opportunity, Strengthening Society*, a strategy to increase racial equality and community cohesion (hereafter referred to as the 'Strategy'). Community is a fundamental unit at the heart of the Strategy but is loosely defined, variously equated with culture, race, colour, ethnicity, religion, and place. It sets out the state's role in creating conditions, including equality of opportunity, that might engender a shared sense of national belonging and the participation of all citizens in undertaking civic responsibilities and work towards social cohesion.

...a cohesive society relies on more than equal opportunities for individuals. It also relies on a number of social conditions that help people from all backgrounds to come together and develop a sense of inclusion and shared British identity defined by common opportunities and mutual expectations on all citizens to contribute to society (Home Office, 2005: 1.9).

The Strategy recognises complexity in its aims: communities are not homogeneous and there is no single sense of Britishness and it thus acknowledges that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach is inappropriate. Its design is not as a top-down policy but rather as a framework to give leadership and support to enable community organisations, business and public services (including education) to meet the needs of their specific communities. In short action is envisaged as being context bound.

This paper explores aspects of the Strategy within the context of a multicultural, inner-London primary school. The school has adopted a range of policies introduced to monitor equality of opportunity; it has used many strategies to encourage parental participation and to develop an ethos that positively reflects its multicultural population and employs teachers and other staff from different cultural backgrounds. Inspection evidence shows the school has very good links with the community and that it promotes the pupils' cultural development well (Ofsted: 2002).

The paper reports on findings from small-scale research in which the views of ten- and eleven-year-old children were sought on the importance of inter-cultural exchange between them in relation to their learning and making a better society. This proved to be a catalyst for subsequent action within the school. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in small groups of children (up to six) who represented a range of cultures in their class. Interviews were taped and lasted a little over an hour, confidentiality was stressed and the children were encouraged to talk openly. The children's comments are discussed below within a wider framework that considers the Strategy as well as background information in relation to Britain as a multicultural country, past educational projects, and the curriculum for citizenship education.

Britain as a multicultural country

Britain has 8 per cent of its population describing themselves as members of an ethnic minority (Census, 2001). However, geographical distribution is uneven: non-white ethnic groups are considerably more likely to live in England than other countries of Britain. Moreover, populations are concentrated in the large urban areas: London, for example, has 45 per cent of the total minority ethnic population. This contrasts with other regions, some of which have a minority ethnic population of only 2 per cent (Office for National Statistics, 2004). The concentration of individual ethnic groups is even more extreme: for example, Greater London contains over 85 per cent of the total Black-African population in Britain and nearly 60 per cent of the Black-Caribbean population, but less than 20% of the Pakistani population (Office for National Statistics, 1999). Distribution of minority ethnic groups within regions and smaller localities is also uneven.

In recent years multiculturalism seems to have entered the national consciousness. The Queen, successive Prime Ministers and leaders of all major political parties have all celebrated the fact that Britain is multicultural. Although it is not universally welcomed, Britain is seen as a multicultural country. For example, returns from a recent opinion poll supposed the minority ethnic population to be at 23 per cent, nearly three times higher than Census data indicates (Community Cohesion Panel 2004). A Commission for Racial Equality paper (2002) reported 89 per cent of respondents agreeing with the statement that 'you don't need to be white to be British' (Home Office, 2004). Furthermore, migration on a global scale and movement within the EU, together with increased birth rates within many minority ethnic groups, suggests the ethnic minority population will continue to rise. In summary, multiculturalism is seen as a fact of British life for now and the future and this renders notions of a single British identity difficult to sustain.

The Strategy recognises multiple identities and notes that 'This does not mean that people need to choose between Britishness and other cultural identities, nor should they sacrifice their particular lifestyles, customs and beliefs, they should be proud of both' (2.14). However, it does not address the complexity of relationships between identities at individual, community, local, national or global level. A shared sense of British identity is repeatedly stressed as a prerequisite for social cohesion, as an anchor for fixity in the dynamics of global change. On another scale primary schools are encouraged to develop character and ethos rooted in their local communities (DfEE/QCA, 2000, *Foreword*). They necessarily work with individual parents and children who as members of their communities are likely to have different anchors of reference, allegiances and social networks that transcend local and national boundaries. The Strategy views diversity as 'an important feature of British society' (2.14), so a sense of Britishness may be differently defined and understood in different localities: however, place may not always be the most significant factor in British identity building. The role of school in the Strategy is thus complex, if not ambiguous.

Past education projects

Historically, immigration to Britain is not new, but the second half of the twentieth century saw a marked increase in levels of immigration. With regard to educational policy the state's initial response was a project of assimilation. There was an expectation that immigrants would adjust their cultural practices to fit in with British culture and an understanding that 'a national system cannot be expected to perpetuate the different

values of immigrant groups' (Commonwealth Immigrants Advisory Council, 1964, in Grosvenor, 1997:50). It recognised the existence of 'a single cultural criterion which was 'white', Christian and English-speaking' (Swann, 1985:196), and underpinning this was a notion of cultural superiority (Grosvenor, 1997). This found expression in policies that presented minority ethnic groups as a problem, as a threat to assimilation and the education of white children.

Throughout the 1960s belief in an assimilationist approach began to falter: Culture proved to be more enduring in second and third-generation immigrant families. Roy Jenkins (1966), then Home Secretary, recognised a 'new era' of 'equal opportunity, accompanied by cultural diversity, in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance'. Although this articulation had little impact and the basic aim of education remained the protection of the existing system and policies (Gilborn, 1990), it nevertheless signalled a changing climate, a realisation that the assimilation project was failing for a number of fundamental reasons. There was no clear notion of what immigrants were supposed to assimilate to: was it as Jenkins suggests to 'someone's misplaced notion of a stereotyped Englishman'? More pertinent was the inherent racism of British society which would not allow assimilation of those whose colour or culture presented visible difference: although many immigrants were British citizens they were not accepted or given status as equal citizens. Related to this there was also growing resistance from minority parents and communities over systematic and institutionalised inequality and injustice. Many teachers, schools and educational authorities questioned the educational effectiveness of assimilation.

Counter to the assimilationist project, celebrating diversity in school was enthusiastically taken up by many teachers and schools in the belief that learning about one's own culture would improve achievement and that through the understanding of others' cultures racial conflict would wither away. By the mid-1970s, 'multiculturalism had risen like a phoenix out of the ashes of monoculturalism' (Troyna, 1993, p25). Some Local Education Authorities also encouraged initiatives while national policy legitimised action. *The Bullock Report* (DES, 1975, Ch.20), for example, argued that 'no child should be expected to ... live and act as though school and home represent two totally separate cultures'. However, despite good intentions some multicultural initiatives further disadvantaged black children. Some secondary schools constructed new 'more relevant' curricula subjects which black pupils actively selected, but these had little value outside school (Stone:1981). Other initiatives were merely tokenistic, reflecting what Troyna (1993) called the '3Ss – saris, samosas and steel bands'. They presented culture as an exotic 'other', reflecting teachers' and schools' Anglo-centric orientation: there was a notion of cultural relativism but they failed to address unequal power relations in British society. Parallel to multiculturalism, antiracist education recognised racism in the wider society at individual and institutional levels and focussed on the role of teachers and schools in addressing racism. Critics argued that this presented a binary view of black and white that ignored significant social, economic, religious and political differences (Modood, 1989 in Gilborn, 2004). Opposition also came in the form of a sustained attack from the New Right that championed 'colour-blind' meritocracy and presented multicultural and antiracist practice as the antithesis of good education (Klein:1993).

The current Strategy, Improving Opportunity, Strengthening Society

The Strategy recognises Britain as a plural society, expressed both descriptively and as an aspirational goal. It provides a number of policy agendas, with the promise of further

guidance in education and other areas that suggest how the gap between the present state of affairs and future vision might be closed. It explicitly recognises institutional racism, that coming from a Black or minority ethnic community can negatively affect life chances, and places emphasis on the importance of antiracist policies and targeted action to address inequality. Although not assimilationist in tone, the Strategy suggests that Black and ethnic minority culture may be a barrier to success: ‘...ensuring [Black and minority ethnic] groups enjoy full opportunities can require specific measures to address particular barriers to progress, associated with their circumstances, experience of racial discrimination, or culture’ (2.4). Explication of these cultural barriers is lacking, but lack of respect for others or the rule of law can be inferred:

Our respect for freedom means that no one set of cultural values should be privileged more than another. With the exception of the values of respect for others and the rule of law, including tolerance and mutual obligations between citizens, which we consider are essential elements of Britishness, differences in values and customs need to be resolved through negotiation (4.4).

Whatever the barriers it indicates an expectation that some cultural groups will make greater adjustment than other groups if they are to have a shared sense of Britishness.

As it stands much emphasis is placed on citizenship education as a means of achieving cohesion. For all the rhetoric, the reality of practice presents a different picture. David Bell (2005), Chief Inspector of Schools, reported inspection evidence that showed citizenship to be the worst taught subject in secondary schools. Inspectors found among teaching staff scepticism, cynicism and fear surrounding citizenship education. It would be surprising if the same were not reflected in primary schools where citizenship education is non-statutory.

Children’s voices

About identity

The children had a clear awareness of their multiple identities with understanding of familial or cultural links to other places and times, and were confident in articulating these, for example:

I’m a British-Muslim;
Kurdish;
British-Bengali;
I’m a Londoner, my mum comes from Trinidad, my dad’s from St. Lucia and my grandparents from India;
I’m not English, I’m Scots; and
I’m mixed race with an Irish-West Indian background.

Society’s ‘acceptance’ or ‘rejection’ of them as British was a non-issue, they regarded themselves unequivocally as British, as belonging, because ‘we’re here’. Their feelings of rootedness were sometimes different from those of their parents or grandparents ‘my Gran always [talks about] going to live in the Caribbean’. The impact of living in a multicultural locality would seem significant to their image of a pluralistic Britain, with no single notion of British identity. The feeling that ‘we’re here, all living together’ not only expresses a solidarity, a sense of shared identity, but also a creative, dynamic construction. Although this is achievable at the local school level where there is direct and

everyday contact, how such a construction could be maintained at a macro level, where frontiers may be presented as barriers and interaction between dominant and subordinate groups is unequal, is unclear. The Strategy sets out essential elements of Britishness – respect, fairness, tolerance – an underlying assumption is that these are trans-cultural, and that ‘social cohesion cannot be built upon emphasising ‘difference’ in a one-sided way...’ (Modood 1997, in Parekh, 2000).

Freedom to talk

The children thought opportunity to talk openly about their backgrounds in the public sphere, in the classroom, was important as it gave legitimacy to their experiences. Recognising difference, where the ‘other’ is seen as of equal worth, can be conducive to encouraging the full participation of all. To this end, creating a secure environment to enable and promote inter-cultural dialogue is seen as a guiding educational principle allowing children not only to use their personal and cultural experience to make sense of new ideas, but to also share, co-create and transform knowledge within the classroom community. Being able to flourish as part of a school community gives important messages about participation in, and belonging to, society as a whole. This message is reinforced when parents and their communities develop positive identification with the school (which in turn is reinforced by the flourishing of children in school and other activities that encourage positive involvement of parents and their communities). Schools are institutions whose services are embodiments of the state and, as the *Parekh Report* (2000) notes, if people feel ‘...identification and at home with public institutions they have a commitment to sustaining them. Such commitment is an essential building block of One Nation’ (4.22). On the other hand, lack of public recognition is damaging to self-esteem and can negatively impact on academic performance. This can further produce a sense of alienation with rejection of, or antagonism toward, society.

Developing intercultural knowledge and communication

How to develop their inter-cultural communication was a subject of great interest to the children. The Strategy emphasises the need for people to ‘... have opportunities to gain an understanding of the range of cultures that contribute to our strength as a country’. Some children thought that having the opportunity to gain understanding of different communities was important to good social relations: ‘if you, like say, in a religion you don’t eat meat you need to know why, so you don’t think they’re rude or nothing’. One child suggested that the focus should be on national symbols ‘the trademarks of different countries, like the Bengal Tiger or the Eiffel Tower for France ...’, another ‘we should learn about our different religions’. Such approaches would seem significant since all the children talked with enthusiasm about participation in previous multicultural school activities (for example in assemblies; music, dance, art, history lessons) some of which took place several years previously. When asked if they thought they should do more activities like these a debate ensued:

It shouldn’t stop work;

We could still do our work and talk at the same time;

We couldn’t concentrate...the teacher would tell us to ‘get on with your work’; and Black history month was good because it tells you about the history of black people, we learned history then.

Including understanding of different cultures would not conflict with their ‘work’ as the National Curriculum is designed to be inclusive and enable pupils to ‘acquire a respect

for their own culture and that of others' (DfEE/QCA:2000:20) through their studies, but would be dependent on the school's interpretation.

Looking for commonalities within differences

Some children suggested that a focus should also be on 'the common things that they have with each other' and about Britain itself 'some people have lived in this country for like 20 years and don't know nothing about this country...like my cousin he lives in this country for 17 years, he doesn't know how to go somewhere that he wants to go'.

All the children agreed that talking about the ordinary, exchanging their everyday thoughts and ideas, was important because 'we talk about anything really, like football, what we eat...you just say what you do. Like you (points to peer) was showing your friend's pictures of your family in Turkey. I've got black, white, Turkish friends, I know more than my dad [about people and their cultures]'. In this respect the school has a significant role in developing cohesion since it represents a site where different cultures meet.

Anti-racism

The children were aware of racism in the wider community and thought that without the teacher upholding antiracist (and general behaviour) policy in school other children would 'say nasty things, cuss your colour, if we weren't supervised people might go crazy – adults can take control, children are frightened of getting into trouble'. This further emphasises the need for a safe and secure environment in which inter-cultural exchange can take place. Some children were particularly worried that their own anti-racist stance might be difficult to sustain in secondary school. They were aware of gang culture reflecting ethnic division: 'I don't bother about Turkish-Kurdish stuff, but my cousins' friend he's in a gang and they fight with the Turkish, and then the Turkish just pick on people if they're mixing'. Although establishing a classroom community gives important messages, showing potentialities for a cohesive society, the road to social cohesion is neither a straight nor an unproblematic journey.

Conclusion

The children's comments endorse most aspects of the Strategy – Improving Opportunity, Strengthening Society. They seem to uphold what is important to social cohesion. They recognise the importance of a safe and secure environment, the value of intercultural exchange to understanding difference and in negotiating one's identity within a community. They show no ambiguity in their multiple identity, which to them is normal. They were very comfortable in calling themselves British-Bengali, British-Muslim, Black-British ... However they were also aware of complexity in establishing and maintaining community cohesion.

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