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‘Culture, Citizenship and Curriculum 1’: early understandings from British secondary schools

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This paper provides a brief elaboration of the contemporary socio-political context that informs and motivates my current PhD research: an examination of the (re)construction of national identities within British secondary schools through policy and curriculum analyses and ethnographic data collection in classrooms. It then outlines a number of my fledgling understandings as they relate to potential challenges inherent in the teaching of citizenship at secondary level, reflecting upon my own early encounters in the field.

Who ‘we’, the British, think we are – and more pertinently still, who we should be taught to think we are – are recurrent hot issues on the national agenda. In January 2005 David Bell, Chief Inspector of Schools for Her Majesty’s Inspectorate, made public his concerns that faith schools, and Islamic schools in particular, were failing to adequately prepare students for full integration within today’s British society. In the same week, Home Secretary Charles Clarke announced proposals for a ‘coming of age citizenship ceremony’ to mark resident teenagers’ 18th birthdays, as well as a pilot national Citizenship Day celebration to be held during October which is intended to promote a stronger and more cohesive collective British community.

The reaction to both stories from public commentators within the national media reflected well-rehearsed arguments from both the political right and left. Melanie Phillips for example, writing for the *Daily Mail* newspaper (January 21st 2005), argued that Britain’s current ‘crisis’ in identity is the result of an ill-conceived, over-zealously ‘politically correct’ assault upon our education system and sense of national self-image. She claims that the country’s proud colonial narrative has been undermined, and school lessons which prioritise slavery over Britain’s rich political history and include culturally sensitive texts from minority authors at the expense of the established English literary canon inculcate shame and confusion rather than engender patriotism or encourage national loyalty. From the left, critics argued that New Labour initiatives to promote an active and engaged British citizenry – whether aimed at recent arrivals or the population as a whole – remain at best a little patronising, and at worst sinister and potentially threatening to minority communities, while multiculturalism is repeatedly cast as a threat to a stable ‘Britishness’ until such a time that a more radical reworking of the concept of British national identity has taken place.

Today the manner and meaning(s) of ‘being British’ remain cloaked in an apparently unshakable ambiguity and certainly are still open to contest. But those public and political attempts at definition that *are* made should not be dismissed as mere intellectual or semantic posturing. Definitions serve to set boundaries of inclusion and exclusion and can be dangerously mobilised in the context (or creation) of inter-group tensions: in polarising frustrated community factions into violent expressions of difference in a number of Britain’s northern cities in the summer of 2001; in feeding into the fears and prejudices that currently find voice in various articulations of British Islamophobia; or in providing a perceived legitimacy for the discourse that has been built around how we present and discuss Britain’s economic immigration and asylum laws.

Britain at the onset of the 21st century increasingly recognises itself as an ever more diverse society. Built upon a recent history of colonialism and post-colonial labour migration and responding to the new challenges and opportunities of devolved government and constitutional reform while at the same time negotiating its role and position within Europe and the wider international community, it operates in an increasingly globalised world of trade, politics, ecology and information exchange. Old certainties and assumed fixed definitions no longer ring true. Instead, as the MacPherson report of 1999, submitted to the government after a public inquiry into the murder of black British teenager Stephen Lawrence, and the recommendations of 2000s Parekh Report on *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain* have made very clear, calls for a 're-imagining' of the nation are entirely justified. New understandings of 'being British' and of 'belonging to the nation' are necessary if we are to be able collectively to move decisively away from historical and colonial assumptions of a white-British norm.

At the level of rhetoric, the current New Labour government appears committed to this agenda, and as some, more sanguine, interpretations of the 1998 Crick Report would appear to suggest, classrooms and the school curriculum are conceived as an apposite arena in which explication of definitions and identities might take place. Compulsory education for citizenship has been introduced at secondary level, intended, at least in part, 'to find or restore' a sense of commonality among today's British public and to promote the notion of belonging to 'our communities' and 'our country' (Osler and Starkey 2002).

However over the last two decades questions of 'identity', 'nationhood' and 'culture' have earned a sizeable notoriety within the social sciences as irrevocably contentious, slippery and inevitably problematic (see for example Castells 2000 or Fenton 1999). How then are such terms being mobilised by policy makers, presented by teachers and made sense of by pupils in actual schools? How is 'belonging' expressed in thought and action? And under whose terms? It has been suggested that, at its best, 'curriculum' can be understood as a deliberative forum in which notions of collective and personal identity can be creatively and constructively debated, problematised and ultimately invigorated (Stenhouse 1980). But education can also be co-opted as a mechanism for cultural reproduction, aspiring only to equip pupils to operate best within the existing, rather problematic framework of the British nation as it stands (Rowe 2002). These are among the issues I am attempting to examine within my current research.

Figure 1: Extract from Folen's GCSE Citizenship textbook (Brett 2002)

Aim

You will:

- start to understand the idea of membership and identification with communities
- analyse how Britain represents itself in the most positive light to the rest of the world
- eplore some of the major symbols of 'Britishness'
- gain an appreciation of the role of the media in forming opinions on the subject
- consider more local and regional senses of personal identity
- explore positive and negative interpretations of 'Britishness'
- increase your understanding of how different parts of Britain are governed
- develop an improved understanding of what makes you a British citizen.

At the level of curriculum guidance (for example as outlined by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, QCA[1]), and apparent within some of new Citizenship and PSHE[2] teaching materials that have recently been produced, there does seem to be an understanding that more sensitive, nuanced and flexible referents for identity and belonging need to be presented in schools. The Folens GCSE Citizenship Studies textbook for example, part of which is reproduced in Figure 1, in common with a number of such texts, asks students to begin by thinking through their own and other people's multiple and at times competing or conflicting identities and allegiances. It goes on to emphasise that the concept 'the nation' is itself a relatively recent phenomenon and in the chapter 'Community and Identity – What makes you a British citizen?' the authors do not shy away from presenting the British nation in an altogether critical and challenging light. 'Source C', for example, is a extract from the political magazine *Red Pepper* written by Gary Younge outlining his position on the Union Jack as a 'conqueror's flag', a 'potent symbol of the arrogance of British colonialism', and advocating its demise (Brett 2002: 7-8).

Younge's article is accompanied by three pictures, one of black British heptathlete Denise Lewis wrapping herself in the flag at the Sydney Olympics, one in which it is being aggressively brandished by some Millwall FC fans (infamous supporters of a South London football club) and one in which it is being worn, mini-skirt style, by pop-star Geri Halliwell as a Spice Girl at the 1996 Brit Music awards. On the same page are some discussion tasks including the questions, 'How do you feel about the Union Jack?' 'What for you is the symbol of Britain?' and 'What might an updated Union Flag for the Twenty-First Century look like? ... How would you make it representative of Britain's diverse society?' Not only are British identities presented to students here and elsewhere throughout the text as multiple, changing and open to contest, but there is also a clear suggestion of the politics and relationships of power implicit in the exercise of definitions and identities being drawn and redrawn. Indeed, common to many of the texts I surveyed during the earliest stages of my research, there is a strong emphasis on fluidity, hybridity and the interdependence of power and meaning. As a social scientist whose background lies in geography and sociology and not in education, I considered that even the most sceptical of my intellectual heroes within the fields of identity politics and critical theory would read these texts feeling vindicated and ultimately reassured.

But whether or not these are the same lessons that are being taught (or learned) inside the classrooms and corridors of actual schools – where textbook instructions are only one version of reality that students are presented with and may interpret as their own – is an altogether different question as my subsequent short, pilot observation visits in a variety of school contexts and my current sustained ethnographic work in one particular English secondary school have made abundantly clear.

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[1] http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/schemes2/citizenship/teachers_guide/

[2] Personal, Social and Health Education.

Figure 2: Extract from field diary

'Ethnic Stereotyping'

A teacher is introducing the theme of the morning's PSHC lesson.

'So we're carrying on our work on racism. Today we'll be looking at 'ethnic stereotyping' okay?' [a boy at the back of the classroom wrinkles up his nose]. 'We'll be looking at what it is, some examples and why it is wrong. Right, so lets look at page 15 of our books.'

… 'Can someone tell me what an 'ethnic group' is? Does anybody know?' [an answer is offered, tentatively, in conversation among a group of pupils at the front – 'it's like a race'. The teacher hears] 'PERFECT! An ethnic group is a race. It is a culture … Can someone else give me an example of an ethnic group? Remember when we did our table of the races in Britain? 'Black Caribbean?' Excellent!' [my emphasis].

The lesson moves quickly on.

(observation of Year 8 [12 to 13 year olds] PSHC lesson, April 2004)

Figure 3 – Table reproduced in Your Life 2 (Foster 2002)

Population of Great Britain by ethnic groups 2000-01

	Millions
White	53.0
Black Caribbean	0.5
Black African	0.4
Indian	1.0
Pakistani	0.7
Bangladeshi	0.3
Chinese	0.1
Other groups	1.1

Social Trends 2002, OHS

Figure 2 is taken from field notes that I made while observing a PSHC lesson (Personal, Social, Health and Citizenship Education) for a class of Year Eight students[3], which is built around a unit of work taken from John Foster's coursebook series *Your Life*. While I am extremely wary of drawing too much from this isolated lesson, I present this extract here as an illustration of a number of issues and potential tensions I have grown familiar with during similar lessons, and in conversations with teaching staff in other schools.

Whether or not this teacher shared the nuanced understanding of identity labels that I have outlined above – and that were to a large extent present in the body of Foster's text itself – they were certainly not translated by him to his students that morning. As I have already suggested, academic engagement with popularised discourses within the social sciences has heavily sensitised me to the use of what I described earlier as a number of notoriously

[3] Year 8 is the second year of compulsory secondary schooling in England and Wales

'contentious', 'slippery' and 'problematic' terms. It was with some consternation then, that I interpreted this teacher's confident assertion, 'Perfect! An ethnic group is a race. It is a culture!', seamlessly conflating three of the most notorious, contentious, slippery and problematic of them all. I was observing here from the position of an arguably hypersensitive enthusiast of critical theory: the teacher was delivering his lesson without that same indulgence, guided perhaps instead by his own personal and professional pedagogical imperatives. He knew the class, the school and the individual students. I was only visiting for a few short days. He would have been conscious of the learning objectives that he had set for the day and where they were supposed to fit within the rest of his lessons. He would have judged for himself an appropriate level of understanding for the group and was aware of how many other things he wanted to have time to discuss before the bell rang for the lesson to end. Or perhaps he did understand all three terms as unproblematic and meaning precisely the same thing. There are a number of possible explanations for the quick and easy definition he was willing to accept that morning. Whatever the case however, I felt that the reduction of complex and contested meaning to an easy-to-remember, 'copy-downable' definition was in contradiction to the ethos of critical engagement and problematised understandings of 'ethnicity', 'nation' and 'identity' (not to mention 'culture' or 'race') that has been argued for elsewhere. But there are further important questions here as to what levels of abstraction, ambiguity and complexity are tenable from a pedagogical rather than sociological perspective.

The table referred to in Figure 2 is reproduced as Figure 3. It is another, perhaps strategic, reduction which appears in almost every one of the citizenship textbooks I have examined so far. As part of a unit of work and discussion on 'living in multicultural Britain' there are again many different reasons why it might be instructive for students to be shown a break-down of the ethnic groups which make up the population as a whole in this manner. But the table itself can be presented and engaged with in very different ways. In a second school, another teacher expressed to me his reservations when using such material

> I feel uncomfortable with tables and numbers like these. But I tell that to the kids – that I'm not sure about the term 'ethnicity' – when we use them. I mean, what does it really mean? We can have all kinds of discussions on that… But I say that it *can* be important, useful for looking at how different people are able to get on in society, you know if you then look at employment and 'ethnic' groups and so on. (notes from interview June 2004).

Here, the notion of 'ethnicity' and what it can mean is directly problematised, even with the youngest of secondary school students. It is also used to develop a critical understanding that certain people might be structurally held back in British society by virtue of what could be characterised as functions of something identified as 'ethnicity' – skin colour, language, or 'culture'. This is a quite different experience from learning to recall 'the different ethnic groups of Britain' (especially where read as 'different cultures, different races' as in Figure 2) which, in my interpretation at least, risks reinforcing conceptions of distinct, immutable and homogenised entities and undermining the possibility of hybridity, ambiguity or change. As if to testify to the efficacy of this second teacher's methods, on a later occasion I arranged a series of small focus group interviews with 13 and 14 year old students at the same school, a number of whom were quick to challenge confidently my own crude identity labels. In response to a discussion prompt framed something along the lines of 'can you think of any significant similarities and differences between 'the British' and other nationalities?' one girl asserted 'I really don't

think that it's very helpful to think with simple labels like that!' (extract from field diary June 2004).

Returning briefly to the table in Figure 3 it is important to ask where pupils are able to locate themselves in relation to 'ethnicity', 'culture' and/or 'race'. For the majority of students in both schools that I have so far described (and indeed in most of those that I have visited) the position offered within this table, and within classroom discussion, is, deceptively simply and straightforwardly 'White'. An essential question within my own research framework, and I would argue central to the whole debate surrounding education and identity in multicultural Britain today, is how appropriate or convincing 'whiteness' is as a residual identifier for Britain's 'ethnic majority'. What does 'white' offer as an ethnic ('cultural', 'racial' or 'national') identity for students to occupy? How does it serve them as a basis from which to reflect upon and enter into discussion on what being British, as distinct from being 'White-British', might mean? From my current perspective at least, these constitute important, but often neglected questions for individual schools, teachers and pupils as well as education policy makers to address.

With good reason, much recent educational research as well as curriculum intervention and teaching guidance has addressed concerns over education in multicultural Britain through focusing on the 'majority' Briton's understandings of, or feelings towards 'others' or through documenting the experiences of 'minority' students themselves. It is my contention however that both researchers and practitioners might also fruitfully attempt to explore 'white' students' understandings of a racialised, or 'ethnicised' self. This is not to champion a Melanie Phillips-esque argument, that we must expend our time and effort in reaffirming, or resurrecting some embattled 'white-British' heritage or identity. Rather, it is to suggest that my experience in schools to date warns that failure to problematise the meanings and experience of student's 'whiteness' within discussion of a re-imagined national narrative as a whole, serves only to elevate its status as an invisible, yet insidiously powerful, standard bearing norm. Figure 4 provides a typical illustration:

Figure 4: Extract from field diary

"Black Countries' and 'Us"

[From conversation following class discussion of common stereotypes]

One boy seems anxious to talk through a concern with the teacher.

'Do you know like in black countries, in India or whatever, do people have as much racism as us? … Would black people taking the mick* out of us in their country … would that be a racialist thing to say? Would they get in as much trouble as we do? [my emphasis added].

The teacher says that that is a very good question, but that he is not sure, it might depend. He'd need to know about the laws in that other country and quickly leads the discussion back round to stereotyping reminding the class that it is 'wrong' wherever.

(observation of Year 8 [12 to 13 year olds] PSHC lesson, April 2004)

['take the mick' – insensitively tease and harass]

Discourses of identity – of 'nation', 'ethnicity', 'race', 'culture' and here I might add 'colour' – are muddied, messy and multiple and within schools, as within wider society,

can be conflated with or used in contradiction to each other in complicated, confused, often unwitting yet consequential, ways. One of my current concerns as a researcher is to be sensitive to and attempt to more fully understand the manner(s) in which the limits of any one discourse might be used and understood to mark the limits of another, critically where 'whiteness' – as skin-colour or as normative cultural practice – continues to be implicitly invoked as an identifier and boundary marker of national 'Britishness' despite strenuous multicultural public and educational policy. Might this also be an appropriate concern for those teachers and those teacher trainers committed to promoting a *fully* inclusive notion of British identity and British citizenship in schools?

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