

Educating through an equity lens: Do diverse and anti-racist classrooms exist?

Lisa Rogers



Lisa Rogers is an education and childhood lecturer and programme leader at the University Centre South Devon and manages the Children and Young People courses in Higher Education. She is currently studying at Leeds Beckett University and is midway through a MA in Childhood Studies and Early Years. Prior to her University teaching career, she worked as an Early Years teacher and Manager and continues to maintain close links with local schools and settings through her undergraduate student's placements.

Introduction

In United Kingdom, as in most countries, the pupil population is becoming increasingly more diverse. There is need for clear directive on teaching a diverse curriculum which includes the subjects of race and ethnicity (Lander, 2014). Every individual has a right to equal opportunities without discrimination (Equality and Rights Commission, 2018) and as there is a steady rise of ethnic minority pupils in primary and secondary education (Department of Education, 2020), the need for schools to encourage and develop multiculturalism is paramount (Kirkham, 2016).

Over the past century, transnational migration has enabled those from minority ethnic groups to fully access the UK education system. Moreover, there have been debates on the pursuit of racial equity in schools and the role of the educator in developing a multicultural approach to teaching (Gorski, 2013; Johnson *et al.*, 2019). Foster (1990)

suggested that findings of racism in schools amounted to little change as there is limited proof that racism exists within school settings and even less to indicate that it impacts upon educational outcomes. However, Yoon (2012) defined this construction as 'whiteness-at-work', where teacher's actions, inactions and statements are the products of hostility and indifferent attitudes to race and ethnicity.

This essay considers how racial inequalities might exist within schools, it considers the impact of teaching approaches upon the racial identity of children, whilst discussing the challenges for teachers to promote an inclusive classroom. It explores the possibility of schools as racial spaces and considers how teachers' approaches to classroom inequalities can impact upon the lives of children from different ethnic groups.

Early Childhood Bias

When children become aware of bias at an early age, racial stereotypes can be formed, affecting how they respond to racial or ethnic groups (Baron and Banji, 2006; Xiao *et al.*,2015). The need to address racial attitudes and behaviour from an early age is paramount. Early years settings are in an excellent position to be advocates and pioneers; they are well-placed to build a solid foundation for respect and a mantra that 'every child matters' (Lane, 2008). Even in early childhood, race and ethnicity are features of everyday life and culture, inscribed in children's lives. Through a succinct and unified approach to tackling racism from as early as preschool, schools and practitioners can produce a multi-cultural curriculum and an anti-racist approach to combat discrimination. A long history of developmental psychological research has focused on the ways in which theory is applied to inequalities with multiple layers of disadvantage interwoven that create the way in which we experience race. Theories imply that prejudice is embedded in our culture, identities are divided because of race; thus, we cannot separate the effects of race, class, and gender as individuals examine their own identity based on the groups that they belong to (Back and Solomos,2009).

Infants as young as 3 months can categorize people by race, showing clear preferences for faces from their own ethnic group, derived from the learned exposure of differences between skin tone and facial physiognomy and the differences of own faces to those of other races (Kelly et al, 2015). Thus, sensitivity to ethnicity is shaped by the visual environment, although it is unclear as to precisely what age young

children become sensitive to the physical differences that define ethnic groups. Moreover, other research has suggested that the roots of racial categorization lie amongst the cognitive processes of young children at an early age, rather than those socially constructed through the observation of physical features (Clark & Clark, 1947; Hirschfield, 1995). A study conducted by Dunham *et al.*, (2016) found that children displayed a racial bias towards others in early childhood, despite not having any specific exposure to this minority group. However, categorization in early childhood has shown to be mostly driven by skin tone, with the attention to other physical features not emerging until middle childhood (Dunham *et al.*, 2016). Racial attitudes can develop as young as eighteen months, producing racial ideologies that may remain with young children as they grow and develop. There is also evidence that early exposure to race and ethnicity has been shown to have an impact on an individual's life chances and social positions, as well as ethnic disparities in educational attainment, highlighting the important role schools and early years settings play in understanding how racial thinking is formed and how white children understand race (Hagerman, 2019).

The role of schools

Schools play a critical part in encouraging anti-racist attitudes and to provide a powerful platform to counter racial discrimination. Every individual has the right to live their life to the fullest without racial discrimination (Equality and Rights Commission, 2018), however with the expansion of different minority groups in the UK over the last twenty years, the population has become increasingly diverse (Office for National Statistics, 2015). There is a steady rise of ethnic minority children in primary schools with 33.9% as such and 32.3% in secondary schools (Department of Education, 2017). As numbers of pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds increase in primary and secondary schools, it is predicted that by the end of 2030, 75% of university students from London will be from an ethnic minority background (Department of Education, 2019).

For some ethnic groups, the educational success stories have been remarkable, sometimes outperforming national averages such as pupils from Chinese and Indian ethnic groups who surpassed the White British group in 2018-2019 with strong GCSE passes in maths and English (Department of Education, 2020). However other groups

have experienced lower than average educational outcomes resulting in a substantial impact on future opportunities, including employment, life chances and well-being (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 2021). Echoed within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), when considering diversity in race, the best interests of the child must be paramount. However, there may be conflicting ideas as to what constitutes the best interest standard, which can sometimes be difficult to reconcile. The UNCRC requires us to make judgements across a set of different communities, despite the difficulty for valid judgements to be made. To promote a vision for children's rights and ensure that a multicultural society and education prevails, schools must engage in dialogue within settings as well as with the wider community, even though some are reluctant to accept a requirement for change. Both the Lammy Review (2017) and Angiolini Report (2017) highlight persistent inequalities within UK education systems, outlining the need for a clear directive to address signs of institutional racism. However, schools are still struggling to communicate effectively and discussion amongst teachers regarding inequality in schools is not always prevalent. Demonstrations, such as those recently triggered by the murder of George Floyd in US in 2020 and the Black Lives Matter campaigns, with the intent to end racial injustice and discrimination, (Clayton, 2018), continue to consistently raise issues regarding race inequality. Patrick Dewael, speaker of the Federal Parliament in Belgium has called for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Hope, 2020) to deal with consistent problems of racism in the country's colonial past. One may question the UK's response to persistent racial inequalities in the UK and whether the educational system suitably addresses race inequalities in schools.

Gaps in attainment

Although there are no national figures for documented incidents of racism in schools, racial abuse is among one of the recorded reasons for exclusion captured in data for permanent exclusions and suspensions in England for 2019/20 (Department of Education, 2020). Black Caribbean children are also 3.5 times more likely to be excluded at primary, secondary and special educational schools than all other children (Department of Education, 2021). Young people's exploration of their own ethnic-racial identity is an important developmental competency, central to their view of self-concept and self-esteem. Moreover, the extent as to which young people define themselves with regards to race is crucial to relationships and outcomes (Song, 2015).

The risk for racial discrimination can be high, and findings in several studies indicate that racial discrimination affects many aspects of ethnic minorities, with 81% of adults experiencing day to day experiences of discrimination (Sanders-Thompson, 1996; Keesler, Michelson and Williams, 1999). A recent survey from Hackney Education (2020) found that many pupils felt uncomfortable by representations of the Black community throughout lessons; discussions were dominated by feelings of oppression and mistreatment of their social identity, resulting in experiences of powerlessness and insensitivity. Moreover, Lewis (2015) reported that racism and discrimination impact those from ethnic minority groups due to a lack of cultural understanding and lack of regard for the complexity of racial identities. This resulted in some from ethnic minority backgrounds having limited access to support and struggling with understanding due to language barriers and complex backgrounds.

Despite key milestones on civil rights for children, coupled with media and public awareness on racial inequalities, there remains educational inequalities for children of colour, persisting internationally through the education system (Garces & Gordon da Cruz, 2017). In the US in 2018-19, the National Adjusted Graduation rate (NAGR) for Asian/Pacific Islander students was 93 %, followed by White 89 % which were both above the national US average of 86%. However, Hispanic 82 %, Black 80 %, and American Indian/Alaska Native 74 % all fell below the average percentage (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Research from several different studies also emphasise the point that students have less access than their white peers to outstanding schools, schools with reliable resources and highly qualified educators (Michelson, 2003; Kozol, 2005; Pollock, 2008). US African/American/Black, Latino and Native American students continue to fall behind through secondary education and enrolment in, and graduation rates from Higher Education establishments are significantly lower than those of white students (U.S Department of Education, 2016). However, the attainment gap in UK between white pupils and those of Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) nationalities is significantly smaller than that in the US, therefore any issues surrounding race disparity cannot be anticipated as the same. Equally, there have been many positive developments and patterns in attainment in UK for BAME students, with pupils from the Chinese ethnic group scoring the highest average Attainment 8 CGSE score out of all ethnic groups (Department of Education, 2021). Recent research (Lewis and Dewie, 2019) shows that strong early year support

is important and evidence-based interventions can improve outcomes across minority groups. Patterns in social and educational attainment have varied dependent on different ethnic groups and at various stages of schooling. However, the patterns of achievement are complex with a lack of awareness of the needs and issues faced by BME children (Lewis and Dewie, 2019).

A shared vision

Griffin *et al.* (2020) suggested that anti-racist teaching requires educators to look at planning through a social and emotional equity lens whilst not being afraid to discuss topics that may promote discomfort. Results from their study concluded that educators should carefully consider how their policies teach students to actively engage in coping strategies against discrimination, as well as for educators to examine their own racial identity. Recent research from Lewis and Demie (2019) discussed the issue of correcting disparities in educational outcomes for BAME students with emphasis placed on the importance of a Black presence in teaching. The curriculum taught in schools can perpetuate racism and white superiority, therefore tackling issues of social justice and equity can encourage ways to critically think about race and racism (Lewis and Demie, 2019). Education can cultivate inclusivity and foster awareness with opportunities to create a haven of mutual respect, acceptance, and multiracial celebration. Children have a right to enjoy their culture and race, guaranteeing a right to an education that develops respect for culture, language, and values (Jones and Walker, 2011). Joseph-Salisbury (2020) discussed a need for a shared vision in schools which encouraged ways to engage in debate so that distinct communities of judgment can listen and communicate effectively with each other. The teaching about cultural diversity encourages children to consider the uniqueness and creativity that exists within groups and societies (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2020) so that they feel safe and secure within their environments. A critical awareness of children's individual needs, alongside an understanding of socio-cultural relationships allows opportunities for strengthening relationships in schools where both teachers and students are supported.

Racial Disparity

There have been strong cases for teachers to resist putting children into categories where assumptions are made, which make students of colour vulnerable to negative

expectations. Research from Song and Aspinall, (2012) concluded that students felt teachers made opinions based purely on their physical appearance. These assumptions confused pupils, leaving them with feelings that they were misunderstood and under-valued. When educators understand the critical discourse of racism within their classrooms, they are better placed to understand the practices within their institution that contribute to the notions of racial thinking (Guinier, 2004). Although the teacher workforce in UK is disproportionately White British, there is a positive trend in teacher diversity, with an increase in the percentage of teachers from Black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds (Department of Education, 2018). White educators must ensure that they commit to changes not only at a personal but also at institutional levels to eradicate racist policy and practice, so that the needs of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic people are met. A study by Blaisdell (2016) offered insight into US schools labelled as racial spaces where social reality is created through historical practices of white supremacy. Teachers are often not aware of their involvement in privileging whites and subjecting students to a racialised hierarchy through their approaches and communication. The study suggested that teaching approaches did not allow those of a lower ability, who were disproportionately African American and Latino to close the literacy gap and receive similar opportunities to those of their white peers (Blaisdell, 2016). Hence, these students were labelled 'fragile' and with the use of a 'culture of segregation' teachers failed to recognise how they were manifesting whiteness in day-to day classroom practices. Critics in both the UK and USA have suggested that racism permeates throughout all of society as a type of structural discrimination. (Gillborn, 2006; Chadderton, 2013). Therefore, an understanding of racial disparity in society where people of colour face segregation help to give insight into how this is transferred to the classroom.

Butler (2004) argues that racial identity is entirely shaped and produced by society where individuals react to historical and socially situated practices which construct their identities through repetition and imitation. In a society where whiteness continues to be a dominant discourse, there is also an assumption that the school system provides an equal and fair playing field (Lynn and Parker, 2006) although this might not always be the case. Even though there is increasing evidence to imply that racism continues to exist within the educational system, race is rarely referred to in

educational policy and racial inequalities are not recognised as a significant issue (Gillborn, 2006).

Teacher Diversity

For children to understand a multi-ethnic United Kingdom, it is important that teachers and practitioners teach a curriculum that reflects wide political agendas and provides an unbiased view of historical and current events. A poll of more than 400 BAME teachers found that 54% have encountered experiences that they believe are degrading to their racial identity and cultural heritage (Barnardos,2020). Despite the new National Curriculum in 2014 aiming 'to promote the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils' and 'of society' (Department of Education, 2014), omission of the terms to race or ethnicity in the Teachers' Standards in England (2014) have left teachers unsure about how to discuss race in the classroom. Furthermore, it has also been suggested that many teachers hold low expectations of BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) children, despite them knowing that stereotypical behaviour can have a negative impact upon BAME students (Lewis and Demie, 2018). This has resulted in teachers' lacking confidence and feeling unprepared in tackling institutional racism. Some teachers of different ethnic backgrounds have learnt to internalize their own experiences of racism in the classroom, with the culture of whiteness being a considerable barrier and challenge, resulting in the use of self-knowledge to develop their own practice (Brown, 2013; Kohli, 2014). On a positive note, statistics show that there is an upward trend in workforce diversity, with 14%¹ of the teacher workforce belonging to an ethnic minority (School Workforce Census, 2018).

Thirty years on from the Swann Report (Swann, 1985) it is evident that teaching of equality and diversity is not always at the heart of the curriculum, despite the knowledge that being a part of a rich and varied community promotes a sense of equity. Hirsh (2020) highlighted the power of linking stories from different heritages and ethnic backgrounds, weaving them into a shared-knowledge curriculum to create a genuine sense of belonging amongst pupils. Through an understanding of the contribution that different ethnic and social class backgrounds make to a country helps

¹ The term 'ethnic minorities' also include certain White groups such as Irish Traveller, Roma, and Gypsy. More information can be found at: [Writing about ethnicity - GOV.UK \(ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/writing-about-ethnicity).

young people to identify themselves as part of a wider, unified community. Hirsh (2020) addressed a similar failing in the education system in US, however the message is fundamentally universal. Ensure schools are telling the story of a modern multicultural Britain as these stories matter and they can be used to empower so that young people have a well-rounded understanding of the contributions of all minorities (Adichie, 2009). However, be mindful that schools are functions of community, where inclusive practice can transform groups that are vulnerable into young people that feel empowered within society (Boyle and Charles, 2016).

Literature from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) 2020 suggests that diversity among teachers makes it more probable that children from ethnic minorities will be supported by role models that understand and relate to their backgrounds. Consequently, the lack of a Black presence within the profession results in BAME students becoming dis-engaged and absent from the classroom. The Runnymede Trust (2020) concluded that those schools which focused on Black History Month found it brought its own challenges, despite the best intentions and created an expectation that teaching a more inclusive curriculum is reduced to one month of the academic year (Joseph-Salisbury, 2020). However, recent evidence from the Social Mobility Commission (2020) concludes that although teachers from ethnic minorities are on the rise and appear to positively push for broader curricula, they are also facing resistance from counterparts within the ethnic majority, with white teachers still missing valuable opportunities to teach about inclusive British culture. This results in failure to connect with the rich diversity that presents within our school communities. How we portray our historic past and how this is presented to young people in education is crucial to their understanding of multiculturalism; this includes teaching of Commonwealth history and how different ethnic minorities fit into the patterns of society. Whilst this may not be revolutionary, it highlights the need for further work to take place and further importance placed on delivering Black British history in schools to help to equip young people with a sense of identity.

An inclusive curriculum

Organisations such as the Black Curriculum (2019) promote a commitment to improving social cohesion between young people in the UK by teaching an accessible educational Black history curriculum to raise attainment for young people. Whilst it is

too early to ascertain the impact of this movement upon schools, young people continue to campaign for change to be made to the National Curriculum in England. Interestingly, Charles (2019) discusses examples of schoolteachers using role-play which focuses on slavery and brutality, making clear assumptions about White and Black children's relationships to the issue of slavery. This highlights a genuine lack of cultural understanding in classrooms and questions the way in which educators are meeting the diverse needs of the children within their care. There are places within the curriculum where Black history can be taught, however schools face obstacles in the guise of lack of teacher knowledge, lack of confidence and lack of school support due to shortages of money. Research has shown that some teachers feel uncomfortable in teaching and dealing with diversity, in particular subjects such as Black history and slavery and whilst many teachers are committed to diversity, some are unsure as to why and how diverse histories matter (Cannadine *et al.*, 2011; Harris and Clarke, 2011). With teachers lacking in confidence in how to teach about racial identity and deal effectively with racial experiences, there is a fear of low expectations and racial stereotyping (Lewis, 2016). Therefore, the call for more training appears to be high on some agendas with the recommendation for more BAME teachers, racial literacy resources and an anti-racist pedagogy embedded throughout the curriculum to provide the education system with a much-needed multicultural education framework (Runnymede, 2015; National Educational Association, 2019). By eradicating the teaching of Black people's contributions within our society, the possibilities to learn about shared history with other countries across the world as well as the study of the British Empire is limited. When teachers are clear and confident in delivering an inclusive curriculum, rather than being fearful of introducing anything new that might challenge, there will be further scope for inclusive attitudes to teaching (Henry, 2020).

Whilst numbers within ethnic minority groups rise, alongside exclusions, it is still difficult to ascertain whether racism is a determining factor in educational outcomes amongst ethnic minority groups (Strand, 2021). However, some educational establishments have been so concerned about the notion that diversity has been sidelined by the National Curriculum that schools are developing their own diverse and anti-racist curricula and undertaking further independent research to gather their own data (Alexander *et al.*, 2015). Equally, how teachers construct their racial identity and classroom expectations is rooted in their own experiences with race and racism,

therefore impacting upon their teaching and student outcomes (Lewis and Diamond, 2015). As educators, the attitude that we hold to our own imperial history is one that we should be proud of, however lack of Black teacher presence, 'whiteness at work' and lack of teacher confidence and awareness continue to achieve mixed responses.

Whilst it may not be impossible to encapsulate hundreds of years of culture and history into one curriculum, there remains clear challenges placed in the way for children of colour in education. Success of embracing cultural diversity in schools is achieving mixed responses; campaigns to change the system and policy continue, with mandatory diversity training policy remaining high on some agendas (Runnymede, 2015). Recent research and findings depict a pressing requirement for educators to develop practices that challenge racial thinking (Charles, 2019). There is a need to make racial identity visible in schools with the participation of Black educators, despite this being a source of debate for many years. However, there may be more scope for research on making racial identity visible in the Early Childhood Education, especially as the profession continues to remain overwhelming white (Department for Education, 2014). Although racial and class oppression exist within school environments, with children receiving messages about race from a variety of sources, the teacher remains an important agent of ethnic-racial socialisation in the classroom (D'Angelo & Dixey, 2001).

There is scope for racial attitudes to be addressed as early as possible in childhood with clear opportunities for equality and embedded to be within the early years curriculum. A consistent approach by schools is needed to ensure that anti-racist attitudes are adopted, and more importantly racial thinking is challenged amongst the school community. Schools must turn the spotlight on themselves, examining both teacher diversity and curriculum approaches to provide a multicultural education framework that ensures that they are developing children's abilities and respecting children's rights (National Educational Association, 2019). There is still further work to be done, becoming a culturally and racially competent educator is not an easy task. However, when teachers reflect upon their own identity, prejudices, and bias, it enables schools to further understand the complexity of racial inequality in classrooms. Racial disparities will always exist, however there are practical ways in which to forge a way forward for racial fairness and promote a successful and multicultural educational community.

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