

## 'The Myth of Racist Kids'

Notes towards a reply, 2 November 2009

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### **Background: 'Playground race police'**

1. 'Primary school pupils and toddlers in nurseries are being punished for making racist insults,' said a front page story in *The Daily Telegraph* on Thursday 29 October 2009, 'even if they don't understand the terms they use.' It continued: 'Teachers are being treated like counter staff in police stations as they have to fill in forms detailing name-calling and jokes. Meanwhile diversity "missionaries" are said to be increasing the divide between white and black children by forcing them to see everything through the prism of race.'
2. The *Telegraph's* Comment piece was headed 'Sinister Tendencies' and sub-titled: 'Will an ignorant, but so-called racist, remark by a child of four be held against them for the rest of their life?' There was coverage along similar lines in the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express*. The headline in the *Express* was GROUP RAPS PLAYGROUND 'RACE POLICE'.
3. The references were to *The Myth of Racist Kids: antiracist policy and the regulation of school life* by Adrian Hart, published by the Manifesto Club. This claims that civil servants at the DCSF, together with officers and inspectors in local authorities, and encouraged by various academics, promote false ideas about the nature of racism. As a result, they do much harm, both to children and to teachers, particularly in primary schools. Amongst other things, the report criticises in passing what it sees as the malign influence of Black History Month and Holocaust Memorial Day.
4. In summary, the report's recommendations to government are: abolish compulsory reporting of racist incidents; don't project adult politics on to children; refrain from exaggerating racism in British society, and telling children that racism is rife in schools; do not conflate children's socio-economic problems with racism; respect schools' autonomy and professional skills in dealing with problems in the playground, and review the current level of policy interference.
5. The report contains some interesting points that do need discussing. The author is respected for a child-centred film he made about racism recently for Essex County Council entitled *Only Human*, now available nationally on Teachers TV. But overall, *The Myth of Racist Kids* seriously misrepresents the guidance issued by local authorities, the DCSF and academic literature. It does this by the use of quotations out of context; the use of misquotations; denying things which the guidance does not assert; asserting things which it does not deny; and containing a range of inaccuracies.
6. Some examples of the way the Manifesto Club misrepresents official advice are given below. The examples are all taken from the sections of the report dealing with the DCSF guidance published on Teachernet.

### **Inaccuracy**

7. *The Myth of Racist Kids* introduces the DCSF guidance published on Teachernet as essentially about 'wounding words'. It claims that along with others the DCSF 'holds that certain words or phrases, once uttered, represent air-born acts of racism, regardless of the status or intentions of the speaker'.
8. But in point of fact, Teachernet is essentially about bullying, not about words, and stresses that bullying involves a wide range of behaviour, not just verbal. It is relevant to quote in full the definition of racist bullying on which it is based:

'The term racist bullying refers to a range of hurtful behaviour, both physical and psychological, that makes a person feel unwelcome, marginalised, excluded, powerless or worthless because of their colour, ethnicity, culture, faith community, national origin or national status.'

9. The Manifesto Club does not even cite this definition let alone engage with it. Its claim that Teachernet holds that 'certain words or phrases, once uttered, represent air-borne acts of racism' is simply not true. What Teachernet actually says on this subject is the exact opposite: 'Few if any terms are always and everywhere offensive. It is possible for outrageous terms to be used in friendly teasing between equals, for example, and for words which previous generations found unacceptable to be re-claimed.'

### **Misquotation**

10. The Manifesto Club claims the following words are a quotation from Teachernet:

'Two children are arguing. One calls the other "fatty" and the second replies with a racist term such as "Paki". ... Both types [of insult] are hurtful but "Paki" goes to the very roots of someone's identity and sense of belonging, and attacks not only the individual child but also his or her parents and grandparents and the wider community and tradition to which they belong.... People don't get murdered for being fat or for having ginger hair, or for wearing glasses, or having spots on their faces.'

11. All these sentences do appear on Teachernet, anyway approximately. They do not, however, appear in the way the Manifesto Club claims. It is instructive to compare and contrast what Teachernet actually says with what *The Myth of Racist Kids* falsely claims it says. The context is a set of questions frequently asked by teachers (FAQs); one of the questions from a teacher cited by Teachernet is this:

'In the playground two children are arguing about something and the argument becomes heated and mutually abusive. One then calls the other 'fatty' or 'spotty' or some such and the second replies with a racist term such as Paki or Gyppo, or with words along the lines of 'Go back where you came from'. Should the second child be treated more severely than the first? If so, why? If not, why not?'

12. It can be seen at a glance that the Manifesto Club vastly and seriously over-simplifies and distorts the question with which Teachernet is concerned. Also it seriously misrepresents Teachernet's response to the question. In full, Teachernet's response says:

'It sounds as if both children have acted badly — though not so very differently from the ways in which adults sometimes behave badly, for also in the adult world arguments sometimes escalate and people say things in the heat of the moment they later regret. It sounds further that the two children are equally matched in terms of power — so this is probably not an instance of bullying.

'The task for a member of staff, in the first instance, is to calm the children down and to act as a mediator. If sanctions are applied these should be the same for each.

'However, both children need to be in no doubt that, as a general rule, insults such as Paki and Gyppo are even more serious than insults such as Fatty or Spotty. Both types are hurtful but the first type goes to the very roots of someone's identity and sense of belonging, and attacks not only the individual child but also his or her parents and grandparents and the wider community and tradition to which they belong. Hate crimes, including murder, are committed against people because they are black or Asian. People do not get

murdered for being fat or for having ginger hair, or for wearing glasses, or for having spots on their faces.

'All bullying contains the message "you don't belong here" — here in this group of friends, this playground, this neighbourhood. Racist bullying goes further — the message is also "you don't belong in this country". It can be deeply devastating and traumatic.'

13. Again, it can be seen at a glance that *The Myth of Racist Kids* vastly over-simplifies what Teachernet actually says.

#### **Further example of misquotation**

14. Teachernet continues with a follow-up question from the same teacher. It is here and only here, incidentally, that the phrase 'wounding words' appears in the Teachernet advice, namely within a question asked by a teacher:

'Yes, but in this example where two children have an argument, and both use wounding words in the heat of the moment, but only one of the words is racist, how should the incident be recorded? It seems bizarre and unfair to record the one remark but not the other?'

15. The Teachernet response is totally clear that both insults are unacceptable and stresses it is the exchange of insults that should be recorded, not just the one insult:

'Local authorities expect schools to use the definition of racist incident developed by the Association of Chief Police Officers, quoted above. It follows that the episode under discussion here should indeed be logged as a racist incident, and should be included in the return to the local authority that the school makes. The incident is the exchange of insults, not just the one insult.'

16. The Manifesto Club's version of this is as follows:

'The incident is the exchange of insults, not just the one insult.  
... The definition is for the purposes of initial recording. Just because an incident is alleged or perceived to be racist does not mean that it *is* racist. But it *does* mean that it must be recorded and investigated.  
The definition implies that if anyone thinks an incident is racist then it will definitely be taken seriously and investigated.'

17. In this instance *The Myth of Racist Kids* not only over-simplifies the advice but also inserts several sentences that do not in fact appear in the original text on Teachernet – they appear on an earlier page in an answer to a different question. Commenting on the story, the Manifesto Club claims that Teachernet suggests the one child could be seen as 'a fat racist'. But Teachernet never uses the word racist as a noun, and never uses it as an adjective before a noun referring to a person. So for example, with regard to this latter point, the term 'racist kids' appears nowhere in the Teachernet guidance, and nor does any equivalent term.

#### **Concluding note**

18. Some of the Manifesto Club's criticisms of current practices in schools and local authorities are legitimate, at least to a certain extent. However, the practices need to be improved, not scrapped. Criticism of them needs to be accompanied by accurate reporting, not misrepresentation, of official advice.

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#### **References**

[http://www.manifestoclub.com/files/MC\\_Myth%20report%20preview.pdf](http://www.manifestoclub.com/files/MC_Myth%20report%20preview.pdf)

<http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/wholeschool/behaviour/tacklingbullying/racistbullying/>