

Classrooms and Corridors

– DfES advice on racist bullying in schools

Robin Richardson

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Uneasy suspicion

The composer Nitin Sawhney enjoyed his schooldays by and large, and had the good fortune to meet some inspirational teachers. 'But I went through school,' he writes, 'with an uneasy suspicion that I was inferior'. He wondered why:

It may have been a product of the notion that the history of the non-white population of this world is embedded in slavery and colonisation, or perhaps the echoing resonance of the word Paki as it accompanied me through the hostile corridors of the science block.

Sawhney beautifully crystallises in this sentence the concerns of newly published advice from the DfES on dealing with racist bullying in schools (www.teachernet.gov.uk/racistbullying). On the one hand, there are classrooms, and what is taught there about history and humanity. On the other, there are corridors, and all other such places where young people interact outside the supervision of adults, where a traumatic experience may be 'the echoing resonance of the word Paki', and many similar abusive, excluding, devastating words. Classrooms and corridors can reinforce each other to give out the message that certain pupils are inferior. Or classroom and corridor can reinforce each other with the opposite message, that all are equal and all belong; all stretch to define their identity and their history; all have a stake, to recall a fine phrase of curriculum developers in the 1960s, in 'the unfinished business of humankind's evolution'.

The new DfES web-based advice on racist bullying in schools quotes from Sawhney's autobiographical sketch, and also from other adults similarly looking back to their schooldays. Further, it draws on, and is inspired and nurtured and emboldened by, the voices, stories, memories, sufferings and experiences of children and young people still at school, and by their resolution, resilience and sense of personal and collective responsibility. This part of the website, in common indeed with many other parts, owes much to work over the years in the London Borough of Ealing. Titles of the website's introductory material, drawn from writings and comments by young people, include:

They used to call me names ... I never had the chance to explain ... Listen to us, we are the experts ... How it feels to be a Traveller ... What really hurt me ... What was there to say? ... I refuse to be a victim ... I just want to say thank you

The website is introduced not only by the voices of children and young people but also by a message from the minister for schools, commending the website to all teachers, and by brief reminders of law and statute. These include reference to school self-evaluation, and to the *Every Child Matters* requirements. Since the advice is solidly backed by ministerial approval, and solidly based in law and statute, schools and local authorities would be wise, to put it mildly, to take account of it. Preventing and addressing racism is not an optional extra, something to see to if and when more fundamental things are in place. On the contrary, it is central and foundational in the educational enterprise.

Defining racism

This overview of the advice refers to ten key features. Two of them have already been mentioned –the advice derives its authority from being grounded in (1) stories and messages from young people and (2) educational statutes and race relations legislation. Feature number three is that the advice develops and expands the Lawrence Inquiry discourse of racist incidents and conceptualises the problem we're faced with as bullying, essentially – something to be tackled within the framework of a school's behaviour and anti-bullying policies, and something that is part of a general pattern, not a set of one-off episodes or incidents.

This aspect of the advice has encountered a certain degree of resistance both in the antiracist community and in the anti-bullying community, for in both places it seems to water down their concerns. Those who produced the advice, however, remain confident that so-called racist incidents in schools should be seen as instances of bullying. That said, whilst all instances of racist bullying are racist incidents, in the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry definition, and should be recorded and reported accordingly, not all racist incidents involve bullying. The operational definition proposed by the DfES, hammered out and refined over several months of reflection and consultation, is as follows:

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.

Feature four is to do with how racism is conceptualised. The advice is concerned, to put the point academically though a bit awkwardly, with racisms, not with a single kind of prejudice. Our society's various racisms have things in common with each other, most certainly, but also it is sometimes crucial to distinguish between colour racism and cultural racism, in order to affirm that we are concerned with both, and to act on that affirmation. Throughout the advice there are reminders that racism doesn't only affect people perceived to be different, and not full or 'real' members of society, because of their appearance, particularly the colour of their skin. Also, people may be perceived to be unwelcome, untrustworthy and unbritish because of their culture or religion. Racism encompasses, this is by way of saying – in addition to hostility and distrust based on skin colour – antisemitism and Islamophobia, anti-Gypsy and Traveller hostility, and anti-refugee hostility.

Prevention and intervention

Key features five and six are to do respectively with prevention and intervention, or with being proactive and being reactive, or – following the terminology in the Lawrence Report and subsequent Ofsted documentation – preventing and addressing. The preferred words for this distinction in the DfES advice are preventing and responding.

Under the first of these headings, preventing, the advice provides a menu of 40 possible starting points for school self-evaluation. The 40 points are not – of course – a scorecard to go through one at a time, ticking them or oneself off. Rather they are a reminder – stimulating and supportive, hopefully, not daunting or depressing – of things that may need attention in any one school at any one time. Also under the heading of preventing there is discussion of big ideas and key concepts across the curriculum – all subjects, all key stages – and there are outlines of some 40 classroom activities that embody and explore the big ideas in practical detail. Further, there are stories and case studies, and notes on teaching about controversial issues. Much of the section on preventing, in other words, is about classrooms rather than about corridors.

Under the heading of Responding (key feature six) the advice provides guidance on supporting learners in schools who are at the receiving end of racisms, and guidance on challenging those who are responsible. The latter is based on a typology developed by Home Office researchers in the 1990s. You can (a) ignore (b) rebuke (c) use logical arguments against or (d) adopt a

holistic approach to, incidents of racist bullying. The dangers of ignoring are obvious. Those of rebuking are that it may cause bitterness and a resolve, next time, not to be found out. The dangers of logical arguments are that, though reasoning may hone the debating skills of teachers, it may also act as racism does – namely, to quote again Nitin Sawhney but in a different context, it may give the pupils concerned 'an uneasy suspicion that they are inferior'. It may then, in consequence, act as a recruiting sergeant for the far right. Equally seriously, it may breed enthusiasm for those voices in modern society which claim that the source of current ills lies in multiculturalism and political correctness (about which, more below).

A holistic approach involves seeing and dealing with racist bullying within a social context that involves bystanders and reinforcers as well as ringleaders, and – of course – putting one's primary energy into being proactive and preventative. It's much easier to respond effectively when something happens if one has first thought through how to prevent it.

Racist bullying and other bullying

Key feature seven is about the similarities between racist bullying and, as the saying sometimes is, 'ordinary' bullying. 'I know intuitively,' said a headteacher at one of the consultative workshops preparing the DfES guidance, 'that racist name-calling differs from other kinds of name-calling – an insult such as Paki or Gyppo is different from one such as Spotty, Four Eyes or Fatty. But I haven't got the vocabulary to explain this even to myself, let alone to my colleagues, and let alone to children, governors and parents.' The advice tries to help that headteacher, and all others thus troubled.

The need for such explanation and discussion was starkly illustrated in April 2006, just after the last of the 18 dissemination events that the DfES organised to publicise the new website, by a legal case in the north-west, and by the coverage the case received in some of the media. An editorial comment in the *Daily Telegraph* began as follows:

Anybody who was ever called unkind names at school must be gasping with astonishment this weekend at the news that the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) has thought fit to bring criminal charges against a 10-year-old who is said to have called an 11-year-old schoolmate a 'Paki' and 'Bin Laden' in the playground. Every word uttered by Jonathan Finestine, the District Court Judge who is hearing the case at Salford Youth Court, rang with common sense. The decision to prosecute, he said, was 'crazy'. It was 'political correctness gone mad' (there are times when only a cliché will do to describe the sheer crassness of modern British bureaucracy).

It continued:

'I was repeatedly called fat at school,' said the judge. 'Does this amount to a criminal offence?... Nobody is more against racist abuse than me, but these are boys in a playground, this is nonsense... There must be other ways of dealing with this apart from criminal prosecution. In the old days, the headmaster would have got them both and given them a good clouting.' The judge had other home truths to tell, which ought to give the Greater Manchester Police and the CPS pause for thought. 'This is how stupid the whole system is getting,' he said. 'There are major crimes out there and the police don't bother to prosecute. If you get your car stolen, it doesn't matter, but you get two kids falling out ... this is nonsense.'

'Two kids falling out' – that was how the case was presented in the media. It was a mere 'playground spat', they said. What actually happened was that three white boys repeatedly harassed and persecuted a boy of mixed heritage over a period of six months or more, calling him Paki, Bin Laden and Nigger. His parents complained to the school but the abuse continued. Eventually, when the verbal abuse was accompanied by a physical attack, and the boy was injured, they went to the police. The police for their part successfully used restorative justice approaches with two of the alleged culprits, who apologised and accepted formal

reprimands. The parents of the third, however, refused to let him apologise and the CPS reluctantly took the case to court.

'Schoolchildren squabble'

Editorial comment in the *Daily Mail* echoed the *Telegraph*:

It happens all the time. Schoolchildren squabble. There may be tears. They call each other utterly unacceptable names. Their teacher calls them over and tells them not to be so offensive and learn to respect each other. So children learn to become responsible adults. Not this time. Now a playground quarrel engages the full majesty of the law, with a police investigation, a file prepared for the Crown Prosecution Service, an appearance in court ... The splendid Jonathan Finestein...

Under the headline 'Up on a charge of being a typical child', Minette Marin in the *Sunday Times* recalled her own schooldays:

When I was about nine, I had my mouth washed out with soap and water — a surprisingly nasty ordeal — by the headmistress for insulting another girl unforgivably, even though she had insulted me first, almost as nastily. Despite its injustice, it was a good lesson.

The DfES kept its head down on the controversy, though apparently someone in government, according to the *Mail*, anonymously let it be known that Mr Finestein had government backing. But spokespersons for the NUT and the NASUWT, to their credit, were fearless in their criticism of the judge. This brought upon them, however, extraordinary personal abuse from sections of the media. The *Mail* said the NUT representative was a blinkered workaholic and that her comments reflected the 'bovine, brainwashed politically-correct mindset of the liberal establishment'. It referred also to her 'politically correct world of inverted values'. 'It can't be long before the hags and thought-police of the teachers' unions try to outlaw the use of nicknames altogether,' claimed AN Wilson in the *Telegraph*. 'If this kind of sanctimonious silliness exists at the top of the teachers' unions what hope is there for education in this country?' asked Minette Marin. 'How typical of the teaching unions, in their crazed desire to stalinise our children rather than educate them,' commented Simon Heffer in the *Telegraph*. He continued with ponderous sarcasm:

Since neither the CPS nor the police have anything better to do, perhaps I could suggest an extension of this policy, starting with abandoning the minimum age of criminality. It is obvious that all primary schools and, indeed, nurseries should be regularly inspected for signs of racist tots, with exemplary prosecutions where necessary. And don't forget maternity wards - you can't catch them too young, and heaven knows what harm is being done to our nation by bigoted babies.

And there were, of course, letters to editors. Extracts on the *Mail* website included:

At last a Judge with the guts to speak his mind. I totally agree with him. The case should never have been taken to court. Since the set of jokers, we call a Government have been in power, Britain has gone to the dogs. Everything is too PC and I am sick to death of hearing 'Human Rights'.

It is typical of the state of British education that members of the teaching profession, many of whom were instrumental in removing corporal punishment from our schools, thereby directly contributing in no small way to the appalling standards of behaviour we see in some children today, would support such a ludicrous notion.

I have been called a Brit and Victor Meldrew, so perhaps I should waste police time having this 'crime' investigated.

Comments such as these, and such as those from editors and columnists cited earlier, are a salutary reminder of the climate of opinion in parts of modern society, and of the insecurities and anxieties by which many white people continue to be haunted. The anxieties are frequently expressed through attacks on what the media call 'the political correctness brigade'. The DfES advice on dealing with racist bullying helps teachers to engage firmly, confidently and respectfully with such anxieties, and to allay them

Websites

The eighth key feature of the site is that the advice contains an annotated list of over 100 relevant websites. including several designed for children and young people. Most but by no means all are based in England. Webquests for learners should take in, amongst many others, *Kiddiesville Football Club*, based in Scotland; *Hometown*, based in the work the Anti-Bullying Alliance; *Ekta*, based in Kettering, Northamptonshire; and *Rewind*, based in the West Midlands. Webquests for teachers should start where children start, of course, and should surf also to *Racism No way*, based in Australia; *Facing History and Ourselves*, based in the United States; *Voice our Concern*, based in the Republic of Ireland; *Young, British and Muslim*, based at the Guardian newspaper; *Stop Bullying Me*, based in Alberta, Canada; and, on the full range of race equality issues in education, the wonderfully encyclopaedic site of *Portsmouth Language Service*.

Training and staff development

Nine, the advice is for dipping into and selecting from, not for reading sequentially from start to finish. (Though incidentally it can be read, on screen, as an A4 document containing 132 pages.) Its tone throughout is not so much 'this is what schools should do' but 'this is what schools should think about and talk about'. Some of the material in the advice is presented in the form of training exercises. Nearly all of it, however, can be readily re-worked for training purposes.

At one of the consultative conferences that prepared the advice a speaker commented on the distinctive aspects that training in the antiracism field needs to have. 'Typically,' she said 'we think about training in terms of skills, knowledge and understanding. But whenever there's training which involves the element of race, it has to be more than that. It has to engage hearts and minds, it has to force us to contemplate our humanity. It's got to be more than facts, figures, skills and pedagogy, it's actually got to make us think about love and care and concern and kindness.' She continued: 'We have to acknowledge the guilt that some of our white colleagues feel and the resentment and anger of some of our black colleagues and we've got to come to a position collectively, where we agree that guilt and blame have no place at the dining table of shared responsibility.' The material about training in the advice, whether upfront or by implication, is mindful of, and inspired by, those words.

Consultation

The tenth key feature has been touched on and implied from time to time in this overview and now needs to be spoken and saluted explicitly: the advice derives from, and is grounded in, substantial processes of consultation over the last two and a half years. There were workshops for headteachers at nine regional conferences and two one-day national conferences. Documentation and correspondence were studied from a wide range of local authorities, voluntary organisations, teacher unions and associations and individuals, and there was a 24-hour writing workshop to pull everything together. The purpose was to bring the anti-bullying and antiracist communities and constituencies together and to articulate and crystallise what practitioners in these two fields know and believe. The advice is not from 'us' to 'them' but from us to us, from practitioners to practitioners.

The hope and the resolution are to expand and strengthen us here at the dining table, and in the curriculum and corridors, of shared responsibility.
