

Paper 15: A holistic approach to incidents

This paper

This paper outlines four possible approaches when dealing with racist incidents in schools. It is adapted and developed from *The Perpetrators of Racial Harassment and Racial Violence*, Home Office Research Study 176, 1997.

The paper distinguishes between a holistic approach and three other possible approaches.

Approach 1

Ignoring, or making light of the incident

Ignoring an incident is seldom if ever appropriate. It permits the person responsible for the bullying – and also his or her friends and associates, and any witnesses – to assume there is nothing wrong with their behaviour. The behaviour may therefore be repeated. Also, this approach gives no support to the pupils who have been attacked. They may in consequence assume the teacher and the school generally are indifferent to racism, and will not bother to complain if there are further incidents.

Approach 2

Rebuke and punishment

This is sometimes entirely appropriate – the pupil responsible and any onlookers must be in no doubt that the behaviour is unacceptable, and the pupil who has been attacked must be in no doubt that he or she is supported by the school. But if rebukes and punishments are used in isolation, and not complemented by teaching and learning about the reasons why racism is wrong, they may merely feed bitterness and a sense of not being understood. Such bitterness may then be expressed elsewhere, away from the school's awareness.

Approach 3

Reasoning

It is important, certainly, that teachers and youth workers should explain why racism is wrong, and that they should demonstrate with facts and rationality that racist beliefs are both false and harmful. This may involve pointing out that even when a factual statement is true ('They own all the corner shops round here') it does not justify violence or hatred. But like rebukes and punishments, intellectual arguments may merely feed bitterness and a sense of not being understood. Pupils may also feel an increased sense of personal inferiority and powerlessness, and greater resentment of authority, and may become *more* racist in their attitudes and behaviour rather than less.

Approach 4

Holistic

A holistic approach involves seeing an incident in its context, and dealing with it within an overall school framework. Key points with regard to racism-based bullying include:

- Racist beliefs and behaviour in young people have their sources in anxieties about identity and territory, and in desires to belong to a sub-culture of peers or a gang where racism is one (but usually not the only one) of the defining features.

- Teachers and youth workers should show that they understand such anxieties and desires, and should try to engage with them.
 - All pupils should be involved in dealing with racist incidents – it is not just a matter for teachers and youth workers.
 - Both as individuals and as staffs, teachers need to have a shared philosophy about the nature of a multicultural society, and about how to deal with conflicts, controversies and difference.
 - It must be clearly understood that racism involves not only prejudice based on colour and appearance but also prejudices connected with religion and culture, for example Islamophobia and antisemitism, and hostility to Travellers and Gypsies.
 - It is not only the behaviour of certain young people that should be challenged, but also the role of sections of the media in presenting and perpetuating negative stereotypes of certain communities and groups.
 - The role of the teacher is to help learners understand their own behaviour and, as appropriate, to change it. This may involve, but should not be limited to, the use of reprimands and sanctions.
 - There should be attention to preventing and reducing racism through the curriculum (particularly but by no means only the citizenship and PSHE curriculum) and in a school's overall ethos.
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