Countering racist bullying

Paper 2: Report on a conference

This paper

This paper reports on a conference organised by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in March 2005.

Background and summary

1. In 2003/2004 the DfES organised nine regional conferences on anti-bullying. There were about 400 participants at each, mainly headteachers, and at each there was at least one workshop or presentation dealing with racist behaviour. In order to develop this aspect of the conferences further, the DfES organised a national and smaller conference in March 2005, with a view to publishing advice later in 2005. About 100 people accepted the invitation to attend and many others requested to be kept informed.

2. Participants considered reports and presentations about recent projects and initiatives and made preliminary recommendations about what the advice to be published later in the year should contain.

3. This paper outlines what was said at the conference and invites further comment. Its sections are as follows:

    ❑   Forms and definitions of racism *(paragraphs 5–8)*

    ❑   The need for holistic approaches *(paragraphs 9–10)*

    ❑   Working with parents *(paragraph 11)*

    ❑   The role of support staff *(paragraphs 12–13)*

    ❑   Leadership and participation *(paragraph 14)*

    ❑   The format of DfES advice *(paragraphs 15–19)*

Forms and definitions of racism

4. In several of the discussion groups at the conference there was reference to the ways racism has changed over time. Principally racism has focused on physical characteristics – most notably skin colour – as a marker of significant difference between 'us' and 'the other'. Nearly always, though, there have been cultural components as well – the other is perceived be an outsider with regard not only to appearance but also to matters of custom, beliefs and values.

5. Racism around skin colour continues to be prevalent and serious, and schools must continue to be alert to it and to challenge it. But also there are forms of racism which are primarily to do with culture, customs and heritage and these too must be addressed and countered by schools. Particular mention was made at the conference, in addition to colour racism, to the following:

    ❑   **Islamophobia** – the term itself is not ideal, it was said, but undoubtedly schools should play a part in countering anti-Muslim prejudice and hostility within their own spheres of influence. Islamophobia is not to do with hostility to Islamic religious beliefs, but with denying equal rights and

respect to people of Islamic heritage.

❑ **anti-Traveller prejudice** – it was pointed out in many of the conference sessions that prejudice towards Gypsy and Traveller people continues to be 'respectable' in many quarters and that it is a significant factor affecting the lives and life-chances of children and young people who are targeted by it. This makes more difficult the task of winning the trust of children and young people who have been particularly marginalised.

❑ **anti-refugee prejudice** – the role of schools in supporting children whose families are seeking asylum is rendered more difficult by the negative coverage of asylum issues in sections of the media and by the claim that all people seeking asylum are a threat.

6.   It was pointed out, with regard to all three of these, that sections of the print media frequently create, and then exacerbate, moral panics amongst their readers. This makes rational discussion and deliberation all but impossible, not only in the media themselves but also in wider society, including schools.

7.   It was recommended that, in recording racist incidents, there should be distinct and separate categories for those affecting people of Muslim heritage, Gypsies and Travellers, and refugees.

8.   The scope of the DfES Advice would, of course, be wider than these three categories of racism.

The need for holistic approaches

9.   'Only a holistic approach,' it was said, 'can encourage real change.' Holistic approaches are needed in individual schools, it was stressed, and also at governmental level and in local authorities. Some heads, it was pointed out, will need continuing support in their responsibilities for leading and managing change to increase inclusion.

10.   Developing holistic approaches will involve attention to the following points:

❑ **An overall moral, legal and intellectual framework is required.**
There was reference to the UN Convention on Human Rights, for example, as a way of integrating action on racist bullying with action on bullying more generally. Instead or as well, action on all kinds of bullying should be integrated within overall policies of promoting equality, respecting diversity and giving all pupils a sense of inclusion and belonging.

At national level there needs to be a common vocabulary and concern.
There are implications, therefore, it was suggested, for a range of national organisations. These implications would need to be explored with and amongst those organisations.

❑ **A mix of teaching approaches is required**.
It is particularly relevant to stress that pupils learn from experiential approaches. There was much reference in this connection to the use of film forum theatre, role play, puppets, stories and Persona Dolls, and to pupils being involved in the formulation of codes of practice and the design of peer mediation schemes.

❑ **There are implications for the whole curriculum and for the whole of a school's ethos.**
'It's not just a matter dealing with incidents,' it was said, 'for actual incidents are just the tip of the iceberg. We've got to look at issues of nation and belonging, and understand racism's deep dynamics.' Dealing with racism in schools is not just a mechanistic matter of filling in forms.

Working with parents

11.   One of the discussion groups at the conference focused on the importance of working with parents. It was stressed:

❑ **Parents' own experiences of racism and bullying** whilst at school and in wider society may make it difficult for professionals and schools to engage them. Parents may need additional support to work through and move on from their own experiences, scars and memories before being able to support their own children.

❑ **Behaviour and assumptions of certain staff** can sometimes be detrimental and off-putting to parents.

❑ **A partnership approach**, based on trust and open dialogue, is required.

The role of support staff

12.   There was much discussion of the key roles and contributions of adults in schools who have support, administrative and complementary responsibilities. Adults in complementary roles, it was emphasised, and especially those who lead at lunchtimes and at break, are frequently the first people in whom learners confide when they are experiencing racism and bullying. The following points were made:

❑ **Shared background** – support staff are more likely to come from the same communities as the learners at the school, both geographical and cultural, and from the same class background.

❑ **Continuity** – they are often, especially in schools of high staff turnover, the colleagues who have been at the school longest and they therefore represent continuity for learners and for their parents.

❑ **Parental perspectives** – they are more likely than other staff to be past, present or potential parents of learners at the school.

❑ **Marginality** – often such staff are in the school each day for a short time only and typically they are not included in INSET days; they are underpaid and may be under-respected.

13.   Complementary adults should be familiar with antiracist and anti-bullying policies – and also, even more importantly, they should be involved in the creation and review of such policies. This must include discussions and decisions about appropriate and inappropriate language. In this connection a document from one particular LEA was strongly commended. Other key points made in this discussion included:

❑ **Recruitment** – there should be continuing recruitment from, and support for, relevant communities, including Traveller communities.

- **Sharing of experience** – secondary schools should learn from the success of primary schools in including complementary adults in all aspects of school life.

- **Emotional support** – for staff in whom learners confide.

- **Visual environment –** using dinner halls as sites for public display of antiracist and inclusion messages and giving lunchtime leaders scope and responsibility for developing this.

- **Contributing to INSET** – lunchtime leaders and LMs talking about their experience of being first point of call.

Leadership and participation

14. The lead taken by the DfES, as evidenced by this conference itself, was warmly welcomed. Also, there was substantial approval of the intention to consult practitioners, for example those who had been invited to this conference. The greater the input the DfES has from practitioners, it was said, the greater the impact of the eventual advice.

The format of DfES advice

15. In the course of the day there were many references not only to the content and scope of the proposed DfES advice but also to issues of style, tone and presentation. It was urged that the advice should:

- be forceful and carry weight and gravitas

- be made available for local communities

- be in plain language

- be upfront and honest about the issue and why we should all be involved – it is no one person's or institution's sole responsibility

- contain clear expectations in terms of what the advice is aiming to achieve

- recognise that advice is not a final answer, for 'we are all engaged in a learning process and we will never be said to have done the job or to have got it sorted'

- contain examples of good practice at all age levels and key stages

- refer to up-to-date research on practical projects, as reported for example in *The Search for Tolerance: challenging and changing racist attitudes and behaviour among young people* by Gerard Lemos, funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation

- stress to everyone 'we need you to be on board'.

16. It was noted that in the first instance the advice will be provided on a website rather than in print.

17. Advice needs to work hand in hand with training and excellent training materials should therefore be provided. Also, advice should be accompanied by letters to

key elected members in every local authority.

18.   The advice should contain suggestions on agreeing:

- ❑   a common definition of the differences and similarities between racist bullying and other forms of bullying

- ❑   common monitoring tools and reporting procedures

19.   Other points and suggestions included:

- ❑   the need to stress the importance of this work in mainly white schools

- ❑   the importance of addressing all racism – 'it is never OK for anyone to call anyone else a racist name'

- ❑   the importance of including points that are directly relevant to early years settings

- ❑   a planning toolkit – for example on how to develop partnerships, ensure effective participation of children and young people, and implement and sustain best practice alongside effective monitoring and assessment of needs

- ❑   the need to ensure that social and emotional skills programmes contain a module on antiracism and that in addition an antiracist thread runs throughout each programme

- ❑   information to schools on how antiracism and anti-bullying work will have a positive impact on participation, teaching, learning and citizenship

- ❑   help for schools to find their own solutions by providing prompts and case studies which they can use to tailor their own policy and to sustain best practice.

If you would like to comment on any aspect of this paper, or to contribute any papers, reports or documentation from your own experience, or from that of your school or local authority, please contact Sarah Willett, Department for Education and Skills, Sanctuary Buildings, London SW1P 3BT, or Sarah.Willett@dfes.gsi.gov.uk.