

## Paper 21: Notes on incidents

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### **This paper**

This paper comments on the stories in paper 20, and links them to other papers in this resource folder. It can be used as reference material by trainers or facilitators during discussions of the stories. Instead or as well it can act as an aide-memoire for all participants after discussions of the stories have taken place.

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### **A bit of teasing**

The first priority is to provide sympathy and moral support and to affirm that the pupil was right to mention the episode – it's not a matter of 'telling tales'. The teacher needs also to show empathy for the feelings of distress that many South Asian people in Britain felt after 9/11 and the ensuing wars, and after various terrorist attacks.

It is outrageous, if true, that the class teacher showed little interest. All staff at the school (including administrative and support staff as well as teachers) should be alert to the nature and likelihood of racist bullying, particularly at times of national or international tension. A shared whole-staff approach can be developed through discussing an episode such as this reflectively, and considering various angles on it.

Events and conflicts overseas frequently have an impact on events in schools and local neighbourhoods in Britain. Schools have to develop consensus amongst staff on how they are going to respond, and how they are going to help pupils to respond. For further notes on whole-school approaches, see papers 12–18 in this collection.

### **Not fair**

It needs to be affirmed that being overweight and being called a Teletubby, or something similar, is hurtful. On this matter the pupil needs some sympathy and support.

The pupil shows some insight into their own behaviour ('I lost it') and this too needs affirming, as does the awareness that terms such as 'Paki' are offensive and unacceptable. It may be useful to mention the differences and similarities between racist name-calling and other name-calling, as outlined in paper 11 in this collection.

Many white people feel a sense of dispossession and dislocation in modern society, and mistakenly attribute this to people who look different from themselves – 'immigrants'. Newspapers often seem to reinforce, or minimally to collude with, this view. It could be that feelings of insecurity are around here, and it may be important therefore to recognise it and talk about it.

It is of course difficult to tell, since only one side of the story is given, whether the school indeed acted unfairly. All insults and forms of bullying are hurtful. Those that are aggravated by racism or cultural or religious prejudice are additionally serious, since they affect larger numbers of people and may hurt someone more deeply (again, see paper 11).

The school's action may well, therefore, have been justified. But the pupil's feelings of unfair treatment are also real and could fester into destructive grievance if they are not dealt with. In any case the essential task for schools in relation to episodes such as this is to educate.

## **Not surprising**

This story illustrates the need for a school to have an agreed policy on dealing with controversial issues, particularly when they arise in classroom discussions. A separate paper in this collection (paper 16) deals with the matter in further detail.

Public policy on refugees and asylum is, objectively, a matter of controversy – there are profound differences of opinion within the main political parties as well as between them. The educational task is to foster understanding. This is likely to involve examining a wide range of opinions, including – probably – the opinions of extremist organisations.

Discussions of public policy may involve not only controversy but also issues that are sensitive. Here, for example, some deep aspects of the pupil's identity appear to be involved, since he has been repeating, presumably with a measure of personal affection and loyalty, the views of one of his carers. It also appears that his two carers have different views from each other.

There is additional sensitivity involved in this instance, since there may well be other pupils in the classroom who will be hurt and distressed by the one pupil's remarks. It's important to recall in this connection that terms such as 'asylum-seeker' and 'immigrant' are often coded ways of referring to *all* people of minority ethnic backgrounds, not just to those for whom they are semantically accurate.

It is entirely reasonable, and indeed extremely desirable, that schools should insist on certain rules of procedure when controversial and sensitive issues are being discussed in the classroom. Such rules have greater weight if they are discussed with pupils as well as by all staff and if they are discussed with, or at least known by, parents.

## **Hasn't come to school**

Clearly, this illustrates the need for teachers to be slow to judgement and to make what Ofsted calls 'calibrated' responses to unacceptable behaviour (paper 9), bearing in mind an incident's full context.

It is sometimes thought that the difference between racist bullying and other bullying is that the latter is persistent over a period of time – 'drip, drip, drip' – whilst the former is typically a one-off incident, not really an instance of what is normally meant by bullying. Whilst a racist remark may be one-off and casual in the perception of the person making it, however, it may be part of a huge and deeply unsettling pattern from the point of view of the person at the receiving end.

In this story, Sue's distress is probably all the greater because she has suddenly been reminded of that larger pattern. There are people close to her who consider that she does not truly belong – they reject her (and by extension her family) not because of *who* she is but because of *what* she is. She is being rejected not only from the culture of the changing room but also from the school, the neighbourhood, Britain, the human race.

## **Ugly inside**

This illustrates many of the points mentioned above in the comments on other stories. Further, it is a reminder that teachers often do not know what is happening amongst pupils in the playground and that they need to devise, and to maintain, ways of finding out.