‘Them and Us’: Race Equality Interventions in Predominantly White Schools

Yaa Asare
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Foreword

Having worked in the field of anti-racism in mainly white schools for the past 25 years, it's very welcome to see this addition to the relatively small body of related work. I also like the focus upon action; it aims to improve what happens in such schools, for the benefit of minority ethnic pupils but also for the better education of the majority.

Yaa centres upon a crucial point: racist incidents are not the expression by individuals of the ‘bad apples’ theory; they are not aberrations from an otherwise harmonious school culture but an expression of variations upon several levels of racism that are inevitably present. This is not to accuse teachers of being ‘racists’ (the frequent defensive reaction that usually arises in these debates) but it is to say that a complex network of assumptions, experiences and structures in which white teachers in white schools are embedded makes racism invisible; it’s almost like it’s in the water.

In my experience, though, it’s often only racist incidents that give teachers an inkling of what’s going on. In the 1980s I analysed the very first London schools’ anti-racist policies and recall being struck by their opening rationales. Time and time again these referred to critical, often violent, incidents, invoking them to legitimate taking the issue seriously. I’ve often found that it’s only the experience of a child they knew personally that has started teachers on the road to unravelling the layers of racism and hence what they might do about it in the broader curriculum. In principle it’s irrelevant whether there are any minority ethnic pupils in a school at all, but human motivation isn’t always galvanised by principle or by clear analysis. I agree with Yaa’s analysis, but I also want to draw attention to strategy.

Yaa argues that ‘schools in less ethnically areas may need to look beyond a response to racist incidents to an engagement with how racial and cultural differences are thought about, lived and experienced.’ Clearly that is what they need to engage with, but as Yaa’s quotes from teachers show, this is a journey that has often scarcely begun. She rightly argues that there is a trap in focusing over-much on racist incidents: it can allow them to be ring-fenced and defined as ‘lone standing events that can be admonished by the behaviour policies of the school.’ But we have here not just a problem of analysis but a problem of action: how do we get beyond these limitations? Teachers deal with 200,000 interactions a year, most of them spontaneous and requiring an immediate reaction; how do we get their attention?

For my money, it’s by using different racist incidents in training and staff seminars to bring out the underlying assumptions and the implicit power relations, considering a short-term response (which is most often necessarily disciplinary in some sense) but crucially also reflecting on a long-term response. This last reflection has to take teachers to policies and curricula, unless they’re actively looking for an easy way out.

This report looks at the position of teachers and of minority pupils in schools in which the majority of students are from white British ethnicities. It adds a great deal to our understanding. Theory and individual motivation need uniting in our strategies. Yaa writes ‘...[S]ome teachers in less ethnically diverse schools may lack the confidence, the experience or the imperative to engage with issues of racial or cultural diversity through the curriculum.’ I agree, but I have yet to find a better imperative than racist incidents, properly understood. This publication will stimulate debate on the best way forward.

Professor Chris Gaine
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Executive Summary

This report looks at the position of teachers and of minority ethnic pupils in schools in which the majority of students are from white British ethnicities. The research developed from an interest in ‘what goes on’ in the implementation of race equality in schools where the majority of the population is white, and in which there may be little experience of the lives and experiences of people from minority ethnicities.

The questions being asked in the research concern the views of personal, social and health education (PSHE) teachers in majority white schools in relation to teaching about cultural diversity as part of the curriculum. Questions are asked about the extent to which they feel equipped and motivated to deliver this perspective in their teaching.

The research also investigates the perspectives of minority ethnic pupils in majority white schools. This report refers to films made as cultural diversity resources, which feature young people in discussions about how they relate to Britishness, identity and belonging in relation to their schools and wider society. Within these discussions the argument is made that it may be useful to consider ‘racist incidents’ with a wider lens (citing Troyna and Hatcher, 1992), which opens up and addresses the context of these incidents. It is suggested that some ‘official discourse’, designed to improve anti-discriminatory practice, may fail to recognize the extent of pervasive structural and cultural inequalities which may set the scene for the occurrence of racist incidents. Rather than trying to understand racist incidents as an aberration from the norm, as is suggested by some instances of ‘official discourse’, it may be more useful to see them as the manifestation of underlying processes which can be addressed through the curriculum.

To support this argument, various social theorists are cited to open up alternative ideas which help us to explore the reality of social exclusion and marginalization that minority ethnic pupils may experience. The paper suggests that in majority white schools there is an absence of ‘polyculture’ (Hewitt, 1989), which Hewitt refers to as the idea of cultures and racial identities being reformulated through proximity and interaction.

Without polyculture in schools, a dominant culture is likely to result in minority cultures and ethnicities being thought about as marginal. Ifekwunigwe refers to this process as bi-racialization (Ifekwunigwe, 1999). This process is discussed in an analysis of the research findings in which some teachers express their concern that in majority white schools there is not the experience of diversity to enable the pupils to understand the implications of racial and cultural difference. Other teachers express their reluctance to address cultural diversity through the curriculum, with some claiming that it is ‘making an issue where there is no issue’.

The suggestion from this research is that as a consequence teachers in majority white schools may be more confident in implementing the policy of responding to racist incidents rather than in engaging with the delivery of cultural diversity teaching in PSHE lessons.

Using the experiences of the minority ethnic pupils who feature in three locally produced cultural diversity resource films, the point is stressed that it may be useful to consider racist incidents from a perspective that takes into account the structural, political, cultural and ideological background to a ‘racist’ incident. At present, schools are not obliged to address these contextual factors, nor do they have to tackle the more subtle manifestations of social exclusion that are not necessarily clearly identified as racist incidents.

The paper concludes by asking whether ‘race’ continues to be the distinguishing characteristic, by which difference can be defined. This question is particularly pertinent when considering the perspectives of young people that ‘race’ as an identifying characteristic may be becoming redundant, as suggested by Nkosi who features in one of the film resources:

I don’t even like to call them my white friends, they’re just my friends.

With reference to Back who refers to ‘the ejection of race from peer group common sense’ (Back, 1996: 51), the idea of ‘race’ may be in the process of fading as a significant signifier in the lives of young people, although perhaps, as discussed in this paper, less so in majority white school settings.
This paper discusses whether racialized intervention in predominantly white schools tends to focus solely, and often simplistically, on the way that racist incidents are responded to, rather than giving attention to the delivery of a curriculum that will open up and explore diversity. It is suggested that school-based interventions that relate to race equality in less ethnically diverse secondary schools need to be situated within the curriculum – this is more likely to encourage a far deeper understanding of the implications and impact of cultural and racial diversity than a single response to a racist incident.

How do policy and legislative imperatives for schools promote the idea of ‘race equality’? Is it possible that policy in this area and its interpretation within the school environment has perpetuated a notion of ‘them and us’? Racist incidents in themselves may be an expression of underlying assumptions, which frame the way in which racial and cultural difference is understood. These assumptions cannot be adequately dealt with by responding solely and simply to a racist incident, but need to be actively addressed throughout the curriculum.

It is suggested that some teachers in less ethnically diverse schools may lack the confidence, the experience or the imperative to engage with issues of racial or cultural diversity through the curriculum. The task of dealing with racist incidents in comparison may be seen as relatively straightforward. Consequently, while those instances of racism that come to teachers’ attention may be dealt with and recorded in line with the schools’ and the local authorities’ behaviour codes, the cultural and institutional understandings from which those incidents arise are often left unchallenged. In order to prepare pupils for life in the diverse society that is modern Britain, schools in less ethnically areas may need to look beyond a response to racist incidents to an engagement with how racial and cultural differences are thought about, lived and experienced.

This paper draws on the findings of qualitative research carried out in two secondary schools which set out to look at implications of the key demands contained in the Duties for Schools of the Race Relations Amendment Act (HMSO, 2000) - namely to offer a curriculum in which cultural diversity is explored and to respond to and record racist incidents. The methodology used in this research is contained in Box 1. The research findings suggest that due to the constituency of majority white schools, pupils and teachers have less experience of cultural and racial diversity from which to frame their understanding of difference. As such there is a greater imperative for such schools to explore and engage with issues of diversity within the curriculum. In order to intervene with greater sensitivity into how ‘race’ and racism is understood and acted upon, it may be necessary to challenge the perspective of some official racialized discourse which outlines the basis for intervention. For example, it is argued here that the definition of institutional racism that emerged from the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry may perpetuate the idea that minority ethnic people themselves, rather than the culture of institutions, constitute the problem.

The important question in the context of less ethnically diverse schools is whether the changes, which the Act is designed to bring about, are fulfilling the Government’s stated objective of preventing as well as addressing racism (HMSO, 2000: 23). It is the contention of this paper that much official discourse contains a fixed understanding of the task of delivering an equalities agenda in schools, which does not take into account some of the nuances and contradictions with which young people themselves may negotiate

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1 Racialized intervention is intervention by teachers that pays attention to ways in which racial and cultural differences are understood.

2 For the purposes of this research ‘majority white’ schools are taken to refer to schools in which only 4-6% of pupils are from minority ethnic backgrounds. This is the definition used in Aiming High: Understanding the Educational Needs of Minority Ethnic Pupils in Mainly White Schools: A Guide to Good Practice (DfES, 2004)
experiences of difference. Rather it is suggested that the experience of cultural or racial difference is complex, fluid and highly contingent to the individual and the situation they are in. This complexity raises challenges for the delivery of a cultural diversity curriculum. The task must be to identify and relate to the subtleties of ‘minority ethnicity’, as it is lived and experienced by those who inhabit this position in all of our schools.
It is not the intention of this discussion, or the theories it draws upon, to deny the reality of racism, but rather to challenge an oversimplified understanding of how, and at what levels, racisms operate. Racism can be understood as being embedded in a discourse rather than as characterizing a person. Essed points out that it is important to make a distinction between the ideas, which perpetuate racism and the person who expresses racism:

I have indicated that practices, ideas, behaviours can be racist, but it is not unproblematic to qualify individuals as racist human beings. It does not make sense to call a person racist when he or she makes a prejudiced statement. (Essed, 1991: 946)

Rather than seeing racism as occurring solely in the moment of a racist incident or in the personality of the pupil who is the perpetrator, it may be more useful to understand racism as a common reference point that can be expressed at times, for example in the moment of conflict, or in the telling of a joke. It can then be left behind at other times. It is this understanding of racism as a discourse, rather than as being attached to an individual, that can be a catalyst for engaging with cultural diversity throughout the curriculum in predominantly white schools, rather than only focusing attention on racist incidents.

To open up ways of making sense of racist interactions between pupils it may be helpful to also consider the work of Jayne Ifekwunigwe (1999). Incidents of ‘racial harassment’ may be seen as a manifestation of asymmetrical social relations between pupils, which Ifekwunigwe refers to as bi-racialization (Ifekwunigwe, 1999). This term is used to describe the dominance of one form of cultural expression and racial identity over another.

The process of bi-racialization dictates that separate inferior Black and superior White social and symbolic designations determine subjectivities and define specific and exclusive group memberships (Ifekwunigwe, 1999: 13)

Ifekwunigwe uses the term bi-racialization to represent Black and White power relations, but it could usefully be used to encompass wider perceptions of ethnic and cultural difference. Bi-racialization may prove to be a less contentious concept than racism from which to investigate the way that difference is understood and acted upon in predominantly white schools. Consideration of bi-racialized power relationships may help to frame a clearer understanding of the response needed to racist incidents, so as well as the incident itself being dealt with, the power relationships which may underlie it are also considered and addressed.

The tendency for the focus of intervention in schools to be only on the incident itself is suggested by this interview response from a teacher who sees the dynamics of ‘race’ as being confined to the expression of racism:

Anne: I had a couple of Asian lads and there was a couple of times maybe that they came up and said ‘Oh someone said this about me’, but again it gets dealt with very quickly, the same as if they were being bullied for any other reason and then it seems to be OK again.

The idea that issues ‘are dealt with’ in the school by punitive measures was frequently repeated in the interviews with other teachers. This idea reflects the view that expressions of racism are not related to the underlying culture, but are lone standing events that can be admonished by the behaviour policies of the school.

During the interviews it became evident that the term ‘cultural diversity’, which was used in the interview questions, was understood by several teachers as signalling the topic of ‘racism’ and by implication ‘racist incidents’. One teacher in particular seemed to develop this reasoning to conclude that the more minority ethnic children there are in a school, the more of a ‘problem’ the school
will have. This is a perspective which assumes that an integral problem is attached to the idea of cultural and racial difference, and that, in effect, the problem resides with those who are different (Dyer, 1997: 8-9).

Mark: Being a majority white school, I suppose a lot of the problems you might get somewhere else, you don’t necessarily have here. I’m trying to think of the handful of people we’ve had in the past, they’ve never had any bullying, they’ve never experienced any bad animosity, but if it did happen it would be dealt with very severely, very severely. It’s like the whole culture of the place is that it’s just not tolerated.

Once again, the suggestion is that the school should only intervene in matters to do with ‘race’ in the event of racial bullying rather than considering how the curriculum content addresses issues of racial and cultural diversity.

The perception that schools need to focus on the manifestation of racist incidents is revealed in the following interview extracts with teachers. Even those who expressed scepticism about the idea of a cultural diversity curriculum were clear about the zero tolerance of racist incidents, as expressed in these responses to the question of how effectively they felt that racism was dealt with:

Anne: I mean the school as a whole, our discipline structure is very strong so, pupils know where the boundaries are, etc., so if that does happen, they’re dealt with the same as if they were being bullied for any other reason and I think it does get dealt with very quickly and very effectively.

Mark: The whole ethos is, you’re here to learn, you’re here to achieve, you’re here to do well and anything that gets in the way of that won’t be tolerated. So if people do mess around in lessons they’re dealt with. We don’t accept any swearing or bad behaviour and you know we can’t accept any racism or any violence towards another pupil.

In addition, those teachers who had felt willing to explore cultural diversity through the curriculum were confident of their school’s capacity to deal with racist incidents:

Derek: ...a teacher would pick up any racist or homophobic comment and deal with it. We would refer it through the house system and at some stage a decision would be made to isolate or exclude the child. If it was aggression as a result of racism, I think the pupil would be excluded straight away but I think that that would happen for other incidents of aggression too. So I think it’s certainly got a definite place in the hierarchy of sanctions at Valley High. I feel absolutely confident that racist comments for example or bullying would be followed up, I’d be very, very confident, its tough to say 100%, certainly 95% of cases.

Rose: I think that they should be dealt with according to the law, which means we have to report them and they have to be recorded. I think that they should be taken very seriously, they should be investigated fully.

There is no ambiguity here about the seriousness that the teachers suggest should be applied to racist incidents and the sanctions that should be taken as a consequence.

How does this positioning of ‘racist incidents’ as the focus for schools’ intervention relate to official racialized discourse? We can surmise that the RR(A) A was an attempt by government to address institutional racism. The relationship between policy intent and classroom intervention involves a process of understanding and engagement that not all teachers may feel committed to. In the interview with Mark, his focus is very much on ensuring that racist incidents are dealt with - he has less interest in teaching about cultural diversity as can be deduced from his claim not to notice racial difference:

YA: How well equipped do you feel, either through your life experience or through training to address issues around cultural and racial diversity?

Mark: Yeah, I feel very equipped. We have had INSETs in the past about how to deal with racial bullying, sexual bullying, so as a school they have tackled...
it. To be honest, you know, everyone’s got equal rights so I just make sure that’s emphasized in my lessons. It doesn’t matter what background you come from, I think every individual has got rights. If I’m looking at two pupils, I don’t notice the colour of their skin, I don’t notice whether they’re a male or a female, each of them has got an equal right in my eyes.

Further on in the same interview, this teacher was asked to consider what should to be taught in the cultural diversity curriculum:

YA: Again, looking at the cultural diversity curriculum, what do you feel are the main issues that need to be taught?

Mark: I think just an acceptance that everyone is different and comes from different backgrounds (silence).

YA: And an exploration of that?

Mark: Mmm, oh definitely yes, yeah. And obviously an exploration of how their own culture fits into other people’s cultures as well. I hadn’t really thought about that before to be honest.

This response would suggest that Mark’s reaction to equality issues is based on his understanding of a human rights perspective in which the racial and cultural background of pupils is seen as insignificant. He has confidence that the behaviour framework of the school is adequate enough to deal with any violations of these rights. From his perspective, the PSHE classroom is not a site for discussing the experience of racial and cultural differences. Therefore the implication in his interview is that to do so and even to notice differences between pupils would go against these human rights principles.

One important criticism of the citizenship curriculum framework is that education about ‘human rights’ is liable to focus on individual interests rather than on structural injustices such as racism. Speaking about the human rights perspective as a way of approaching educational imperatives, Richardson asks:

Do human rights (also) have the potential to focus work for racial justice in the United Kingdom? If so, what are the implications for education? (Osler, 2000: 79)

The citizenship curriculum, although concerned with principles of justice and representation, is in danger, according to Richardson, of isolating these concerns from the social conditions in which they take place. In his critique of the citizenship curriculum’s focus on the human rights of the individual rather than on the community, Richardson suggests that the importance of culture becomes understated. This would certainly seem to be the case in Mark’s interview response in which his focus on human rights is seen to over-rule any concern with exploring or even acknowledging the structural implications of racial or cultural difference.

The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report defines institutional racism as:

The collective failure of an organization to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes or behaviours which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people. (HMSO, 1999)

This important definition suggests that racism operates only in relation to direct contact with minority ethnic people. What the definition fails to encompass is the possibility that racist constructs can be present and have an effect on the culture and the assumptions of an organization, even when no, or few, minority ethnic people are present. In this way, prejudice, ignorance and stereotyping towards minority ethnicities may reside in the way that the organization operates, regardless of the presence of minority ethnic people within it.

In schools that are less ethnically diverse there is an absence of cultures colliding, mingling and transforming, a process which Hewitt refers to as ‘polyculture’ (Hewitt, 1991). This idea of polyculture does not, however, automatically privilege one cultural or racial position over another as occurs in the idea of bi-racialization. Polyculture describes, rather, the idea of cultures and racial identities being reformulated through proximity and interaction. Without the dynamic of polyculture, young people of minority ethnicities need to make sense of their own experiences of being different or being seen as being different in an environment that may not acknowledge
or accept that difference. It is this process that is the subject of the films referenced in this paper, which are designed for use as learning resources in predominantly white schools. This negotiation to find a place of belonging may operate at an internal level, particularly for those young people of ‘mixed race’, as is suggested in the following extracts from films:

It’s good having that British culture and also the South African culture – it’s alright ’cos it means I’m different and it means I can also relate to being not different (Nkosi, Unfolding Identities, 2009)

Being the same as everybody else and having nothing very distinctive about you, I think it would be slightly boring having straight hair, yeah. I wouldn’t be as unique as I am, I think. I’m happy to say I’ve got an eternal tan, which is very cool and I don’t look English either or at least I don’t think I do, do I? (Daniel, Unfolding Identities, 2009)

These quotes illustrate the fluidity of these young people’s identity negotiations in which they may straddle two forms of identification. They are not seeing themselves as rooted in one specific cultural or racial category. In Nkosi’s case, his bi-racial identity enables him to be able to relate to more than one cultural experience and for Daniel, his skin colour is equated to the notion of a ‘tan’ and he is able to engage with his difference and the discussion of whether or not he looks English.
How is a ‘Cultural Diversity’ Curriculum Understood?

The attention given to ‘racist incidents’ as the key site for policy driven intervention may have distracted pedagogic attention away from addressing wider inequalities, prejudice and stereotypes in commonly held understandings about race. A lack of enthusiasm about teaching a curriculum which engages with cultural diversity is illustrated by Anne, a teacher who is wary about focusing too much attention on this area:

YA: Can you think what the main issues are that need to be taught in a cultural diversity curriculum?

Anne: I suppose it comes, maybe not even to cultural diversity as such, within race, but everybody's diversity you know, the fact that people like the colour blue and somebody else likes the colour red. I think the ownership of an opinion should be backed up and say 'yes that's fine' but understand that within that they have to understand that other people are going to think different things or have different beliefs.... I suppose the profile could be raised a little bit but maybe you go from a balance between addressing it to over addressing it maybe and making an issue where there isn’t an issue.

There is a concern here that ‘over addressing’ the subject of cultural diversity could prove to be counter-productive. This teacher’s perception of difference is situated in the idea of people having different perceptions, rather than of being ‘othered’ by institutional culture. Anne sees the prime objective in teaching about ‘difference’ to be to teach openness to other people’s perceptions. Her viewpoint is that a focus specifically on cultural diversity has little relevance, as everyone is different in some respect.

There is a divergence in the attitudes of the PSHE teachers interviewed in this research in the extent to which they feel that cultural diversity should be addressed within the curriculum of pre-dominantly white schools. While some teachers maintain that it is not an issue and should not be given undue attention, others suggest that pupils in less ethnically diverse schools are at a disadvantage by not having the opportunity to experience diversity in their daily lives, for example:

YA: How well equipped do you feel either through your life experience or through training to address cultural or racial diversity issues in your teaching?

Derek: Well, you’re never well equipped enough, and I guess your personality and the way you are dictates how you approach race and all of the other sort of minority issues in general. I think because I work here, I’m not addressing it on a day to day basis, the way that I would be if I was working somewhere else, and as I think I’ve already said I think that the children here don’t get the opportunity to focus on diversity issues the way that youngsters would elsewhere. I think that as a consequence I have little training now and I deal with issues or raise issues with the youngsters based on what’s important to me at any one time, so if our teaching programme involves looking at racial issues I do and if they turn up unexpectedly during the course of a session, we always address them, I’d always address them. But I feel certain that if I was working in an inner city school in any part of the country, it would be much more of a day to day issue and that I’d be involved a whole lot more.

YA: Is there anything that you think maybe that you should be doing but you’re not or that you should be doing differently?

Derek: It should probably be a higher priority in preparing our youngsters for the world that they are going to live in and work in and we do address the issues largely by default apart from
in the PSE programme and the RE programme, I would say. OK, so if something occurs we deal with it or we handle it, rather than maybe looking to raise the issue more frequently.

Derek’s response to the question draws attention to a key finding of the research, namely that the extent to which teachers address issues of diversity is a personal judgement call, particularly in those schools in which these issues may not arise as part of everyday experience. His personal experience has included teaching in inner city schools in which he felt that discussing issues of diversity on a regular basis added to the quality of the education that they received, and that this dimension is lacking in the experiences of the pupils in the majority white school in which he now teaches.

Another respondent, in the same vein as Derek, suggests that cultural diversity should be integral to all subjects and needs to be an essential aspect of the way the curriculum is approached:

YA: How important do you feel it is to address issues of racial and cultural diversity in the school curriculum?

Joanna: Hugely important. Obviously I’ve always felt it was important but it’s increasingly so as we become increasingly diverse as a society and with increased migration globally. And with increased globalization as well, it’s crucial for all of us to become more culturally attuned, more culturally aware, more sensitive to issues of race and ethnicity, more aware of linguistic difference and other languages but also aware of racism and its reality and the experience of that. And we all benefit from that, we all need to become more aware.

Again, the previous experience of this teacher includes work in an inner city school and her own experience of being of mixed race, which she talks about earlier in the interview, has led her to have a strong belief in the need to position cultural diversity as an important area within the school curriculum.

The response of the teachers to these questions about the cultural diversity curriculum is seen to be varied and idiosyncratic, whereas, as suggested, their responses to questions about how racist incidents are dealt with are much more uniform. This difference suggests that whereas the procedure of responding to racist incidents is established within the school, the question of whether and how to approach cultural diversity in PSHE lessons has a far looser framework and is left to the conviction of the individual teacher.

The CRE publication *Learning for All* (CRE, 2000) would seem to endorse the view of racism referred to by Gilroy as a ‘coat-of-paint theory’ (Gilroy, 1992: 52), which suggests that racism is seen as a surface issue rather than being deeply implicated within the structure of society. This view of racism places it on the periphery of social relations, rather than as integral to cultural and social institutions. The following extract from *Learning for All* reflects this position, whereby racism is seen as an aberration:

... staff in predominantly white schools are alerted to the possibility of racism, racial harassment, prejudice and stereotyping (CRE, 2000: 42)

This perspective in suggesting that school staff should be alert to the ‘possibility’ of racism, sees racism in terms of specific actions and statements that break moral and legal codes, rather than asserting that racist constructs may be more pernicious than this guideline suggests. The testimonies of the young people from minority ethnic backgrounds who appear in the films under analysis in this paper suggest that school cultures exist in which those people from a racial or cultural minority may be marginalized by dominant sub-cultures in predominantly white schools.

One teenage African Caribbean boy claims, in referring to his class-mates:

They called me chocolate boy, nothing serious. (*Nothing Serious*, 2001)

A Thai girl, newly arrived from Thailand, to a school in East Sussex, in talking about her peers, claims:

They were laughing behind me and joking about my name and where I come from and my country’s music or something like that. They still think Asian people are, you know, like a bit stupid. (*One of Us*, 2004)
A girl of mixed race, in reflecting on her school experiences of racist bullying, states:

When I was younger I didn’t realize that I was different to everyone else. When you hit secondary school it’s when you realise that you’re living in a minority. *(One of Us, 2004)*

The interviews with some of the teachers suggest that in majority white schools most pupils have no lived experience of the impact of racism, and their understanding of the real implications of cultural and racial difference is limited:

Derek: I think there’s a danger, maybe, particularly in an academic school like our own where the youngsters see it almost as a lesson, rather than as an experience and they tick it off, not necessarily consciously but, ‘Oh, we’ve done racism lets go on to something else’.

Derek is suggesting that the pupils’ perceptions about ‘race’ are built on underlying assumptions which may be particularly difficult to challenge in the context of an academic school. Here any learning based on experience rather than on imparted knowledge, may be undervalued.

The curriculum guidelines in *Learning for All* (CRE, 2000: 28-30) and *Respect for All* (QCA, 2001) pay a lot of attention to meeting the needs of pupils who have English as an additional language, and focus on ensuring equitable opportunities in terms of the attainment of all ethnic groups. However, less attention is paid in these guidance documents to ensuring that the curriculum encourages a direct engagement with the experience of difference, including an understanding of the power balances that may determine this. In less ethnically diverse schools, in which the experience of difference is more acute for minority ethnic pupils, there is little in these standards to suggest how the marginalization, as described by pupils above, could be addressed through the curriculum.

In order to link the event of a racist incident to the way that racial and cultural differences are understood and acted on, it is useful to adapt Troyna and Hatcher’s (1992) classic model of the context and background to a racist incident, in which he offers a wider lens to explain the various locations of racism which may underlie the event. This model is helpful in setting out a broader basis from which to understand the simultaneous locations of racism than the narrow perspective afforded by a focus on the ‘racist incident’ alone. Troyna seeks to understand racist incidents in a synthesized way that is able to incorporate the micro and macro interplay, so that the event can be understood as a moment in which the particular and the general, the biographical and the social, come together in the flare of the incident. Troyna’s framework (summarized in Box 2) may usefully underpin a curriculum item in this topic that the teachers could mediate for their pupils.

### Box 2. Troyna and Hatcher’s framework

In the following model, adapted from Troyna and Hatcher (1992), the suggestion is that each racist incident that occurs in a school can be contextualized through a variety of lenses. Examples drawn from various texts and research reports are given to help conceptualize Troyna’s ideas.

**Institutional:** The differing power and structural relations within the institution in which the incident occurred.

This can be appreciated by considering that an unwitting ethos may amount to discrimination. Richardson and Wood make a useful distinction between personal and institutional racism in the field of education:

Educational institutions may systematically treat or tend to treat pupils and students differently in respect of race, ethnicity or religion. The differential treatment lies within an institution’s ethos and organization rather than in the attitudes, beliefs and intentions of individual members of staff. *(Richardson and Wood, 2000)*
Political/Ideological: The system of ideas prevalent at the time, for example racism, may be justified in the prevailing climate.

For example, in delivering a cultural diversity resource in a Year 11 class in a school in south east England in the run up to the invasion of Iraq, I recorded notes about the lesson in my research diary, indicating the anti-Islamic climate which was evident in the class in which all of the pupils happened to be of white British ethnicity,

There was very little knowledge shared by the pupils during the ‘world quiz’. Not many languages that might be spoken in India were known and the main religion in Iran was thought to be ‘Muslim’. I looked for another word for the religion and said it began with an ‘I’, one boy said ‘ignorant’ and several pupils muttered their agreement. (Asare, 2003)

A racist incident, occurring in this context, may need to be considered in relation to this prevailing Zeitgeist.

Cultural: The lived experience and common sense understandings within the locality and community. This may be manifest in subtle ways that may marginalize the experiences, including the language, of minority cultures and ethnicities. The example shows how a cultural understanding of the dress requirements of people from minority religions is seen from the perspective of what is normal and acceptable.

This was expressed by one of the teachers interviewed in the research highlighted in this paper:

YA: In your opinion and experience how do you think that young people in schools feel about those pupils who are different in terms of culture or religion or race?

Mark: I don’t think they are thought of as being different to be honest. When we had two Rastafarian boys and they had to wear their berets and it was just perfectly accepted. We’ve had a few girls from the Middle East, who’ve had to wear longer skirts, we’ve had no one actually have to wear the full umm, what’s it called?

YA: Hijab?

Mark: Yeah, we’ve had no one that had to wear that. I don’t know if that did occur, how the school would deal with it. There’s been a lot in the press about pupils and what their rights are. I think here, because we’ve got a very strict ethos with regard to uniform and the uniform representing the pupil body, I think that if they did want to wear their jihad [sic] or whatever it’s called, then I think they might be seen as being different, and they probably might not want to. I don’t know, its never actually occurred here, but because there’s such a strong ethos on uniform and presentation, they might feel slightly uncomfortable, which I’d hope they didn’t, you know, but as I say its something the school would have to deal with at governor level, but it’s never occurred. But no, I don’t think the pupils themselves class themselves any different to anyone else. It’s never noticeable anyway.

The emphasis here is on the way that ‘they’, the pupils who are culturally different from the majority are seen to fit in with ‘us’. The underlying perception is that pupils would be wary about putting themselves in a situation in which their difference from the norm is in any way emphasized. The teacher’s use of the word, ‘jihad’ rather than hijab and his word, ‘beret’ to describe tams, worn by some Rastafarians, may be seen as reflecting a world-view in which cultural differences are not incorporated into a common experience of what is ‘normal’.
Sub-cultural: The sub-cultural groups that the pupils identify with. Some examples from the film Nothing Serious (2001) portray how minority ethnic young people who attend majority white schools are affected by their school experiences. These accounts serve to illustrate that the effects of racism are far more pervasive than those manifest in easily identifiable racist incidents alone, and are situated in the sub-cultural spaces that young people create.

- A black African girl recalls being friends with a British born Asian girl, but notices that the British Asian girl becomes unfriendly to her when white pupils from the girls’ peer group are present. The African girl claims that her accent was seen by the British Asian girl to make an explicit friendship with her socially unacceptable.
- A black British born teenager recounts how when he was playing football with friends, a crowd of other unknown boys jeered at him, chanting the Batman theme, replacing the word ‘Batman’ with ‘black man’. His frustration at this incident was not so much at the action of the strangers, but at his friends feeling unable to offer him support or even to comment on what had taken place.

None of the parties who caused these young people to feel hurt would necessarily be seen as responsible for a racist incident under the terms in which a racist incident is defined, and yet both the Asian girl and the friends of the black boy, through their action or inaction, have been responsible for causing hurt and isolation which has a racialized dimension. These examples indicate the limitations of policy, which only responds to direct racist incidents. Such examples of social exclusion may be understood as emerging from a bi-racialized student subculture within the school, which policy pronouncements alone are unable to affect.

Personal: Factors and characteristics specific to the individuals involved. This refers to the relationships between individuals who are connected to the racist incident. For example, the incident may involve negotiations of what it means to ‘belong’ in the course of verbal exchanges between young people. Consideration should be given as to whether ‘winding up’ behaviour or ‘cussing’ between young people should merit official intervention. The meaning of the language used in this behaviour may be subverted through what Back refers to as ‘duelling play’ (Back, 1996: 74), a contest of witty put downs between two or more people, based on personal characteristics and perceived sensitivities. Back explores situations in which this ‘duelling play’ may spill over from jibes, employing racist constructions, to serious put downs in which relationships become vulnerable. The plea that it was ‘just a joke’ or that ‘it don’t mean nothin’’ (Back, 1996: 97) needs to take into account factors to do with the relationship between the individuals involved. The meaning and the implications of ‘playing’ with racist constructs may need to be opened to scrutiny in discussing policy and practice in connection with racist incidents.

Contextual: The immediate history of a racist incident. For example, Hewitt investigates the perception that anti-racist initiatives are unfair in ‘favouring minority ethnic people’. He suggests that this idea may be particularly prevalent among sections of the white working class. He gives an example of a white British girl’s perception of unfairness in an incident in which she feels that she was abused by a Turkish girl before replying with abuse of her own, which resulted in the British girl being punished for using racist language.

In the first year I had a fight with a Turkish girl. She said to me first, ‘You white ice cream head’, and I said, ‘Shut up you Turkish delight’. I got done for racism, she didn’t. (Hewitt, 2005: 127)
The analysis called for here is one which asks questions about the framing of the incident; what was done and said that gave rise to the incident and are there any contextual events that need to be recognized and responded to?

**Interactional:** The actual event or incident, what was done, what was said.
This is the moment of the incident itself and although what actually happened needs to be considered carefully, in order to gain a fuller understanding of the context and implications of the event, the background factors as suggested here need to be uncovered and understood.

Troyna’s model, adapted from Waddington (Waddington et al., 1989: 23) implies that in dealing with racist incidents and in planning the curriculum generally, teachers may need to take wider considerations into account. The historical, cultural and political events within as well as outside of the school environment should be understood as influencing the perceptions of the students (and the teachers) and be opened up for discussion and analysis in the classroom. The challenge for schools, particularly majority white schools, is to engage, through the curriculum, with these structural, cultural, sub-cultural and personal understandings of racial and cultural difference. How that curriculum is designed and presented will involve the teachers in mediating the themes of this model to their colleagues and pupils in ways that they can relate to.

The policy imperative as stated in *Learning for All* (CRE, 2000) to punish racist language or behaviour being exhibited between pupils, fails to ask the question, ‘What exactly is going on here?’ at a profound level. The standards state:

> The school has clear procedures for dealing with perpetrators of racist incidents. (CRE, 2000: 43)

The framework of the victim and perpetrator is a simplistic one which schools are asked to implement on to what may be complex and layered interactions. A reading of *Learning for All* (CRE, 2000) suggests that racist incidents are responded to in a way that isolates the incident from other layers of interaction. Cohen effectively expresses the problems associated with the failure of policy to encompass the complexities and sometime contradictions of racialized reality:

> …in order to construct certain exemplary models of anti-racist policy and practice, it has been necessary to operate in terms of a reductive representation of racism, one which not only scales down its reality, but ignores its more complex features. It is this ‘reductionism’, this disavowal of complexity for the sake of pursuing moral certainties or political ideals, which has led to the present crisis of anti-racist education. (Cohen, 1992: 63)

This claim that racialized realities have been oversimplified by policy pronouncements may have a particular pertinence in predominantly white schools in which there may be less negotiation of appropriate practice with parents, teachers and communities who are themselves of minority ethnicities.
How do Minority Ethnic Young People in Less Ethnically Diverse Schools Make Sense of their Racial and Cultural Identity?

The imperative, expressed throughout official discourse, of the need for a head-on confrontation with ‘racist incidents’, may distract from the exploration of more complex and contingent relations between people of different cultures and ethnicities. A number of different positions have been indicated that might help us address this complexity. We can see the respective value of different approaches when we apply them to the experiences described in the film resources drawn upon here.

In the following extract from the film resource, Unfolding Identities (2009), Nkosi’s experience cannot simply be defined as having been determined by ‘racism’ although it points to stereotypical constructions of ‘the Other’ that are imposed on him:

How people see me, it’s weird because you’ve got my friends and my family, they see me how anyone who knows me sees me I suppose, but then its kind of annoying, because I’ve had experiences where I’ve met a new person, it tends to happen with a lot of white people and adults as well as children, they expect that I’m a troublesome person or I’m going to go out and rob someone. Like I’ll be walking down the street and I see a group of teenagers and they’ll all move out of the way, out of my path, even if I move to the side to let them pass, they’ll still kinda seem wary, seem difficult around me, just because they’ve never seen me before and I’m mixed race. (Nkosi, Unfolding Identities, 2009)

It may be useful to consider this incident through a bi-racialized lens in which previously formed stereotypes of mixed race or Black young people have determined the teenagers’ reaction to Nkosi, causing them to ‘other’ him in this way. Their behaviour may also be seen through Troyna’s lens, as a result of cultural or structural influences that impact on the way that they perceive an unknown mixed race young man on the street. In this way, even though the incident may not be viewed as being racist, and would certainly not be punishable, the concepts that have been suggested here can help us discuss some of the possible underlying dynamics that may have influenced the teenager’s reaction to Nkosi and his consequent frustration.

The fieldwork of Back (1996) and Hewitt (1986, 1996, 2005) suggests that the emergent identities among young people demonstrate looser ties to race or culture than those imagined by ‘official racialized discourse’. Racial meanings are negotiated and renegotiated in the context of young people’s lives, and although racist constructs will play into these negotiations, these constructs cannot be assumed as being necessarily central. Back argues that the analysis of race needs to be situated in specific social contexts and recognizes that ‘It is impossible to divide British social formations into neat cultural departments’ (Back, 1996: 11). The interaction between local authority anti-racist dictates and the socially negotiated understanding of young people provides a rich moment in Back’s ethnography, sited in a youth club. The ‘winding up’ behaviour between two teenagers, a form of interaction prevalent in male, working class culture, results in a racist term being used and Back, as the youth worker, is impelled to react under the terms of ‘manifesto anti-racism’ (Back, 1996: 85) by reprimanding the use of a racist term at the expense of not giving attention to the social context in which the incident took place.

The problem with official racialized procedure...
is the reduction of complex social interactions to the one factor of racism. Back (1996) argues that the reasoning, strategies and practices offered by official discourse in legislation against racism are being contested by young people as they work to find new ways to imagine the significance of racial and cultural difference. As a youth worker, Back was able to develop relationships with young people and from this position to interpret the processes of their identity constructions. These constructions are seen to be breaking free from specific references to their racial origins and moving towards a hybridity of expression and experience. Back describes this process as ‘the ejection of race from peer group common sense’ (Back, 1996: 51).

This ‘common sense’ position of suspicion towards categories that highlight racial differences, may be less common in predominantly white schools. Engagement with minority ethnic people’s experience may need to be encouraged through the curriculum in schools such as these. The forefronting of identity rather than difference may make a useful contribution to this objective. Exploring identity can ensure the incorporation of the pupils’ own experiences in a way that referring to ‘different cultures’ is unable to do. Identity formulation needs to be understood as a fluid event, in which one is always in the process of becoming (Hall, 2000) rather than at a point in which one’s identity has been completely arrived at. The young people in the films express this fluidity of identity positionings. The following quote suggests that the identity of a young woman has shifted since she was a child, moving from a position of negating her Indian identity, to one of pride in being Indian, and yet simultaneously expressive of her wish to live ‘an English life’:

When I was younger, I hated being Indian, I just hated everything about it, the culture, the religion. I didn’t want to be Indian, I wanted to be English and like, move in with my friends, because, you know, I wanted to be English. But now I’m mature and I’ve got older and I’ve understood more about it and I’m proud to be Indian. I’m proud to be Indian but I want to live an English life because I live in this country basically (One of Us, 2004)

In negotiating his own identity positioning, Nkosi expresses his dismissal of those who would attempt to stereotype him to fit their ideas of what they believe he should be. He speaks also of his discomfort of the category of ‘white’ when describing his friends, in this way Nkosi may be seen to be in the process of ejecting the idea of ‘race’ from common sense constructions:

Most of my friends, my day to day friends are white. I mean I have a lot of black friends, don’t get me wrong, but the majority of my friends in this town are white. We’ll be in a situation where people will come up to me and be talking about my race and my skin colour and my culture or whatever and we’ll just laugh about it because I know none of it is true, none of what these people are trying to say is true and my white friends understand that. I mean, I don’t even like to call them my white friends, they’re just my friends, do you know what I mean? (Nkosi, Unfolding Identities, 2009)

In this statement Nkosi expresses a rejection of any labelling based on other people’s assumptions of his racial or cultural references. He suggests that people are trying to say something about him that is untrue, something that is, in fact, laughable. Following this rejection of racialized stereotypes, Nkosi goes on to challenge his own use of the label ‘white’ to talk about his friends, preferring to refer to them as ‘just my friends’.
Conclusion

In predominantly white schools there may be an emphasis on dealing only with racist incidents, rather than on considering approaches that can be made through the curriculum.

It is further argued that some official discourse providing guidance on dealing with racist incidents does not take adequate account of the underlying factors that lead to expressions of racism. The research and materials referenced here suggest that the focus on ‘racist incidents’ does not do the work of describing the experience of minority ethnic pupils in predominantly white schools, some of which is due to others’ negative perceptions around cultural and racial difference. The views expressed by the teachers in this research indicate a wide range of responses to the idea of addressing cultural diversity through the curriculum and suggest some reluctance to acknowledge that cultural diversity needs to be addressed at all.

The literature referred to in this paper supports a broader understanding of the impact of ‘race’ on pupils and teachers in majority white schools. The creation of polyculture (Hewitt, 1991) of cultures colliding and mingling to create ‘new ethnicities’ (Back, 1996) will not be experienced in these environments. As such, the task of opening up an awareness of the implications of cultural and racial differences is even more urgent among pupils and teachers in schools that are less ethnically diverse, as they do not have the experience of diversity as a resource to build on.

How, then, should predominantly white schools engage with a meaningful exploration of lived diversity? It is here that Ifekwunigwe’s concept of bi-racialization can be usefully employed to explain how racialized power relations may influence both pupils’ and teachers’ conceptions of cultural difference. The term can help to open up an appreciation of ways in which dominant cultural understandings can marginalize people from minority ethnicities. Troyna and Hatcher’s idea of ideological, structural and cultural forces, which create the context from which racist incidents emerge, provides useful insight from which to plan curriculum intervention on a wider basis than only dealing with the racist incidents itself. The suggestion being made through this model is that racism can be understood as being a feature of an underlying discourse rather than residing solely in the actions and language of a racist incident.

The challenge then is to move towards a curriculum and a pedagogy that opens up ways of bringing to pupils in less ethnically diverse schools the lived experiences of those who inhabit a cultural and racial reality that is situated outside of the pupils’ ‘norm’. This needs to be done in a way that does not essentialize these differences by teaching about ‘other’ cultures, but in a way that encourages the exploration of experience and makes links to the pupils’ own identities. The planning of new curricula in predominantly white schools should seek to find innovative ways of engaging young people with experiences and outlooks with which they might not be familiar. This approach may start with an exploration of their own experiences of injustice and their own notions of identity and belonging, before making links to those of other people. Some materials which take this approach, using the filmed testimonies of young people as their basis, have been referred to in this paper.

Identities are complex and varied and in a constant process of becoming. They are influenced both by our own agency and by how we are seen by other people.

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One of Us (2004), a film made by East Sussex Education Authority exploring diversity in the educational experiences of young people.


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