

Elton-Chalcraft, Sally (2009) It's not just about black and white, Miss: children's awareness of race. Trentham Books, Stoke on Trent, UK.

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RACISM QUESTIONED...

“IT’S NOT JUST ABOUT BLACK AND WHITE MISS”:



minority ethnic schools) towards the many different cultures which exist in Britain today.

The writer worked collaboratively with the children in deciding how to collect information and this is explained in the final section of the book. Here she provides an insight into her research supporting her argument that the data is richer because the children themselves worked collaboratively with her in designing questions

for the interviews with small groups of children. **One girl of Asian heritage said “So we are like dictionaries Miss you want to look things up in us.”**

My interviews were conducted in such a way that the children felt able to speak freely about different cultures and how to counter racism in their schools. Some children displayed anti racist sentiments, Terri a white girl noted **“Grandparents might think differently. In the olden days people seemed to be more racist. We’ve been brought up to know about different religions and we’re friendlier...children know more and are less racist than adults”.**

I charted children’s opinions into 4 categories, for example:

- **Category A:** anti racist with a high degree of knowledge about other cultures characterized by many Asian heritage children and a few white children for example Terri above.
- **Category B:** Many children, mainly from predominantly white schools, displayed anti racist views despite their paucity of knowledge of cultures different to their own,
- **Category C:** is particularly interesting because I found that a few children who were deemed to be knowledgeable about a variety of diverse cultures nevertheless expressed racist opinions. Sometimes these children instantly regretted their

The attitudes of primary school aged children towards cultural diversity is the subject of a new book by the University of Cumbria's Dr Sally Elton-Chalcraft. Entitled "It's not just about black and white: children's awareness of race" published by Trentham Books (2009), the book explores the thoughts of a range of 9 and 10 year olds (in two predominantly white and two

comments or behaviour, for example a girl of Caribbean heritage pulled at the corners of her eyes mimicking, to her mind, a Chinese person and then said “I shouldn’t have done that”. But one boy of Asian heritage, was described by children from a variety of different cultures, to be a “bully and a racist.”

- **Category D:** A minority of children expressed racist views and these children were in the main white boys from low socio economic backgrounds and showed little knowledge of other cultures. Many of them rehearsed the views they heard at home. This can be found in other work such as the seminal “Racism in children’s lives” Troyna and Hatcher (1992).

For example Max a white boy said:

“My dad's ermm a racist because he don't like no brown skinned people but he does like half caste cos there's a wrestler that's half caste De Roc

Sally: So how did you describe your dad, your Dad's a what?

Max: Err a racist he don't like brown skinned people but he does like half castes, 'cos he's just fine with half castes, 'cos he used to take the rip out of half castes but I said 'don't dad because it's a bit nasty but you can take the rip out of Hindus because I don't like them'. 'Cos it's Bin Laden he's like the boss of all the Hindus (pause) That's about all I know”.

This racist comment is especially offensive for a variety of reasons as Max misconceives Bin Laden as a Hindu and in so doing implies that, like him, all Hindus are terrorists. It would of course be

equally as prejudiced if he had called Bin Laden a Muslim, a detail which many Muslims dispute, because again there is the implication that all Muslims are terrorists. There is obviously much work to be done here!

However, generally the children provide vibrant, profound views, and often rather surprising ideas. I accompany these in the book with my own close observation of school life, and the views and practices of teachers. The following interchange shows children at one of the predominantly white schools talking about the literal colours of people's skins. Bart and Michelle are white, Kurt is dual heritage Caribbean and white:

Kurt: Yeah all the teachers are [white in this school]

Michelle: all the kids are

Kurt: I'm orange

A minority of children expressed racist views and these children were in the main white boys from low socio economic backgrounds

Sally: What did you say?

Kurt: I'm orange

Sally: You're orange?

Bart: Looks like brown

Kurt: I'm half caste

Michelle: And Shanice is [half caste [sic]]

Sally: What do you mean by half caste Kurt?

Kurt: 'Cos my mum - I think she's from Jamaican and erm and so that makes me half caste but I don't know what half caste means

Sally: Ok and what's your Dad?

Kurt: ...he's not from Jamaica - he's half ..he's quarter German...

Sometimes black children in white societies feel they have to name the colour of their outward appearance to show they have pigeonholed themselves in a so-called pecking order. In this instance Kurt did not conform, and I would suggest that he was endeavouring to create his own identity.

I synthesize theory with the findings from my research in the four schools and offer the reader an adaptation of 'types of multiculturalism' adapted from Kincheloe and Stenberg (1997). These types range from the superficial "conservative multiculturalists who are tokenist" to the "critical multiculturalists", the latter being the preferable approach for schools to adopt to ensure anti racism prevails.

1) Conservative multi culturalists (mono culturalism)

are 'tokenist'. They attempt to address multicultural issues but deep down, they believe in the superiority of Western (white), patriarchal culture.

2) Liberal multiculturalists are dedicated towards working to 'one race'. They attempt to gloss over differences in an attempt to make everyone equal and the 'same' ('they' are the 'same' as 'us' they just happen to be a different colour.)

3) Pluralist multiculturalism Pluralism becomes a supreme social virtue, diversity is pursued and exoticised. There is cultural 'tourism' where 'they' (as opposed to 'us') live in an exotic parallel world. Eg "Hanukkah is the Jewish Christmas" (an example of neo colonialism.)

4) Left essentialist multiculturalists are extreme in promoting the minority culture; to the extent that the dominant culture is seen as 'bad' and the marginalised as 'good'.

5) Critical multiculturalists believe in the promotion of an individual's consciousness as a social being. They promote an awareness (self reflection) of how and why his/her opinions and roles are shaped by dominant perspectives. They appreciate that there are differences within as well as between cultures.

Elton-Chalcraft 2009: 82) Adapted from Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997)

I conclude the book with some pointers for future practice that incorporate a critical multicultural stance. This includes: nurturing pride in each child's culture and encouraging respect for unfamiliar cultures; promoting anti-racist education for all children, particularly in predominantly white schools, and challenging cultures of dominance. Throughout the book I draw on the work of leaders in the field notably Connolly (2000), Dadzie (2000) Gaine (2005) and present practical ways forward, for example using Persona Dolls in Religious Education lessons (Elton-Chalcraft 2006). For example a Sikh doll, Jeetinder, is taken to visit a class and talks to the children about visiting the local playground on his journey into their school (thus a rapport is built up with the children). Next the Persona doll, Jeetinder, talks about Sikhism and the similarities and differences between the 5Ks, symbolic items worn by Sikhs, and what the children have learned about Christian symbols, and also the symbols that children may wear everyday, for example Brownie uniforms and football shirts. Finally Jeetinder expresses his dismay at the teasing he encounters about wearing his hair in a top knot and the children discuss racism and the unpleasantness of bullying in general. The lesson ends with the children helping Jeetinder prepare some information about Sikhism so that racism can be challenged and Jeetinder and the children feel empowered to stand up for themselves against bullies and racists.

The book is intended as an enlightening and enjoyable read for primary teachers and student teachers whilst providing what I believe to be important new grounded information for policy makers and school managers.

References

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Biographical note:

Sally Elton-Chalcraft joined St Martin's college now University of Cumbria, as a senior lecturer in 2002. She is the course leader for Religious Studies on the teacher education for primary schools programme. She is also minority ethnic recruitment and retention officer. She works on the Masters level courses at the university, and in 2008 her jointly edited research methods book was published (Elton-Chalcraft, S. Hansen, Twiselton, S. (editors) (2008) *Doing classroom research: a step-by-step guide for student teachers* Maidenhead: OUP.