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Moving into the Unknown

Diane Warner

When it came to choosing children's racially diverse books, white student teachers revealed their inadequate understanding about ethnic and cultural diversity. The research described in this article sprang from my work as a lecturer in Primary Initial Teacher Education. Over three years of marking a particular First Year assignment I noticed a recurring trend which seemed worrying. The assignment required students to choose a children's book on which to plan and explore appropriate classroom approaches. Among the cute animal stories, humorous escapades of hapless children and improbable monsters and aliens, there was a significant absence of racially diverse books.

Pilot data of 100 Year One assignments showed that just three people chose a racially diverse book. This strongly indicated a far larger issue: an apparent barrier caused by the lack of ethnic and cultural awareness among the students.

I use the term 'racially diverse children's books' to mean texts which include characters which are black, from other minority ethnic and marginalised groups in the UK, from Europe and the rest of the World. If the book was non-fiction or an anthology of poetry it needed to make significant reference to such people. A racially diverse book recognises cultural diversity in societies but is also underpinned by the social justice stance of antiracism (see Klein, 1993). This is more overt in texts such as the work of British Caribbean poets John Agard and Benjamin Zephaniah, who write for children.

By presenting and following the adventures of their characters, racially diverse books strive towards an equality not yet recognised in societies where the powerful sustain a social hierarchy to maintain systems of inequality for economic and other purposes. Such books, like anti-sexist and disability-challenging texts, assume an educative, challenging and

representational role. They should naturally be part of a student teacher's repertoire to be used in both discrete – to teach about difference and racism for example – and seamless ways, where black people are shown as characters in everyday life, not as exceptions.

The study found that the new white student teachers at my nearly all-white institution, automatically chose books for use in the primary classroom which reflected their own cultural and ethnic perceptions and views, thus portraying 'white privilege' assumptions and values (Dyer, 2000; Frankenberg, 2000; Solomon *et al*, 2005). They did not recognise the dangers of representing a wholly white world to their pupils in the choice of books they made, which is essentially inaccurate, misleading and misinformed.

Research question and aims

A total of 50 students took part in either a survey or semi-structured interviews. They were mainly 18 to 20 year-olds entering university from the known world of home, community, school and friends, although there were a few mature students. All came from communities and attended primary and secondary schools where less than 10 per cent of the population were from black and minority ethnic groups. The research aimed to discover some reasons and thinking behind their monocultural approach and asked the question: *How far does the cultural position of beginning student teachers affect the way they perceive racially diverse books for children?*

Segregated society, segregated students

The notion of contemporary Britain as an ethnically-divided society is understood by theorists (for example Parekh, 2000 and 2004; Gilroy 1987 and 2000) as an unfortunate given,

premised on the economic migration of the poorest people. These largely come from the former colonies of the Caribbean and Indian sub-continent, African nations and more recently from the European Union. Parekh argues that modern Britain's divisions have resulted from a negative class and racial history, leaving a legacy of unease and suspicion at best and overt racism at worst, despite decades of social and educational policies, antiracist initiatives and now the whole 'inclusion' enterprise.

The students in my research had been segregated from ethnic minority people before they arrived at university and had chosen an institution where 92 per cent are British-White [2007-8 figures]. They are entrenched in what Ambe (2006) describes as 'deep-rooted, old patterns' (p.693).

King (2004) draws on this theory of separateness and applies it to ITE, suggesting that the separate lives of white student teachers from their minority ethnic pupils means they are unable to relate to and teach them adequately. This cultural distance, entrenched by being part of the dominant culture, directly affects their actions and approaches. What she calls 'dysconscious racism' is double-edged: it identifies parameters around cultural and ethnic knowledge and understanding, while allowing the person to feel inclusive and celebratory of other cultures. King asserts that their lives and deeper attitudes remain untouched.

Dysconsciousness is an uncritical habit of mind (includes perceptions, attitudes, assumptions and beliefs) that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given ... is a form of racism that tacitly accepts dominant white norms and privileges. (King, 2004, p.73)

Dysconscious racism also has the effect of devaluing minority ethnic 'others' because at its heart is the desire to retain a self-identity formed by one's cultural past.

Developing pedagogy and student teacher thinking

Research has found that ideas of pedagogic practice which incorporates equity and social inclusion is considered of high value among white student teachers – but it comes with an ironic twist. Causey *et al* (1999) note how this desire for 'absolute democracy' runs alongside an 'optimistic individualism', where refrains such as 'kids are kids, regardless of their background' act as filters which deny children cultural and social opportunities in school. This type of 'egalitarian' stance results, according to Allard and Santoro (2007), from a position in the hegemonic centre, blinding people to how those outside 'dominant discourses [are] marginalized through curricula, pedagogies and assessment practices' (p.117). Being white in the UK situates these students in a structurally-advantaged and race privileged position (Solomon *et al*, 2005) and leads to a 'colour-blindness', which according to Gaine (2005), involves not only failure to acknowledge colour and ethnicity but an uncertainty about how to notice it.

Interviews

The main method of data collection came from in-depth interviews of six first-year students, two of whom were in their 30s. They were all white, of UK heritage and all stated that they had very little awareness of diversity. All had lived in white towns or the white part of a multiracial town and had attended white middle-class schools, two of which had a tiny proportion of minority ethnic pupils with professional parents. At the time of interviewing, the students had carried out all of their teaching practices in white schools within a 30-mile radius of the University. All had chosen books where the protagonist and the other characters were white for the assignment.

'Cultural disawareness'

The notion of 'separateness' which emerged in the research formed into an image of a 'gap' in their thinking, attitudes towards and perceptions of racially diverse issues. This gap (Fig.1) is a vacant space of culturally knowing about themselves or others, created by factors such as social and family background,

influences from their own schooling and their experiences of books and reading. To understand the gap I developed the concept of ‘cultural disawareness’ – a state in which people do not discern or engage with issues of racial diversity. It is not necessarily conscious or calculated but occurs automatically, in a preconditioned manner.

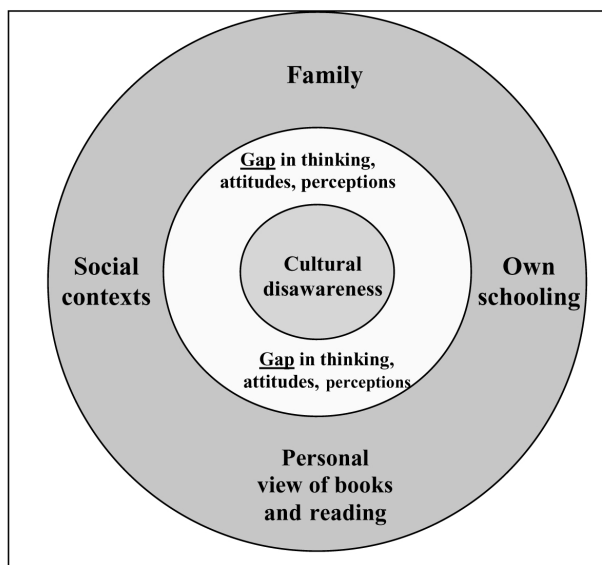


Figure 1

This cultural disawareness was evident in the survey findings too. They revealed that 62 per cent had never heard of any of the listed well-known authors or books concerning multi-ethnic issues, including Benjamin Zephaniah, Anita Desai and Salman Rushdie’s *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*.

The survey showed that half the respondents chose their book as a result of family influences and childhood reading. Interviewee Jessica remembered the nursery rhymes sung by her mother and grandmother, in turn learned from her great-grandmother. Her book choice was linked to family in a particularly poignant way. She chose *Can’t You Sleep Little Bear?* (Waddell, 1988).

Jessica: I had it as a child which was the main reason I chose it ... My Mum used to read it to me ... I think it stuck out more, reading it with my Mum...

Interviewer: Why was that? What difference did your Mum make?

Jessica: I think mainly it was ... like the Big Bear and Little Bear relationship, so ... I just lived with my Mum ... yeh. I think it did help me out a lot when I was little ... It was very much just me and my Mum on our own; like I’ve got other family, but we don’t live near them, so I think that did ... you know ... make it [the text] stick out.

Not one of their childhood reading memories included a racially diverse book. Even Will, a mature student and part-Ukrainian who was born in the UK, read English versions of traditional tales at home and keenly remembers early school readers such as *Topsy and Tim* and *Janet and John*. He was not aware of any diverse literature in those formative years.

...growing up in terms of books ... I wasn’t aware of anybody [non-white] ... the only person that I can think of that wasn’t white European was Man Friday [in *Robinson Crusoe*].

All the interviewees professed their lack of knowledge and understanding of cultures other than their own. Jim, who had read fantasy books since early childhood, acknowledged this influenced his book choice for the assignment. He said: ‘I would go straight to fantasy books for kids ... I played it safe and chose one I knew would work’. He also showed recognition of his cultural limitations: ‘It comes down to exposure to different texts.’

Their own schooling was influential too. Jeanie moved to a multiracial school from an all white, small village school, when she was ten:

I was surprised and the culture shock was ... well, I’d never seen anybody of a different colour; you just knew people in the village. You didn’t even think there was an outside world.

However it was the students’ training placements in school which exacerbated their earlier influences. Feeling inadequate and unconfident as new student teachers, they reverted to the known and ‘safe’ and were happy to be led by the teacher. All reported using texts

chosen by the class teacher – according to Will it was ‘one worry dealt with’. He added:

...you are in an environment that dictates what you should be choosing, and you’re given a booklist and ideas. You tend to stick with what’s traditional.

The school placements of these students were in mainly white schools where a white monoculture was presented in items like displays or curriculum requirements for their planning. Lou was placed in an all-white primary school and reflected that she had never seen any racially diverse books used in teaching or had the opportunity to use any.

Seeds of resistance

In the student teachers’ responses I found repetition, patterns and threads, detected in the early data, of a lack of cultural and ethnic awareness. But what also emerged in the interviews were anomalies or ‘seeds of resistance’ – early signs of pushing against ‘cultural disawareness’.

Will, part Ukrainian, articulated his difference from his peers:

My granddad was dark skinned and my mother was a single teenage mum, so although I .did not know it at the time, I grew up understanding what it meant to be different.

His later employment in a firm which employed many Black and Asian people also affected his outlook:

You want school to reflect what’s life. The reality is that you might grow up in a white area...but that’s not how the World is ... As educators we have the opportunity to make sure that children experience as many opportunities as they can and as diverse [sic] as they can.

Helena became more aware of societal attitudes towards difference and disadvantage because of her mother’s job as a care worker with learning-disadvantaged people. Jessica often visited the

school of her aunt, the headteacher of a multiracial West Midlands primary school.

...it’s always been a main issue with her that when she was doing displays...it was always, always racially-diverse displays; the importance of including other cultures has been kind of drummed into me.

Lou was able to hold onto her positive beliefs about issues of diversity while on placement at a white school which displayed contrary tendencies. She described the community as narrow and inward-looking and felt this was reflected in the school’s outlook. As well as by the lack of racially diverse books, resources and displays she was disturbed by a particular incident:

...they had an Asian child join the school, the white parents were very against it and they complained. It was white, working-class... really old-fashioned, values like that ... I think they [school] were concerned about upsetting people, rather than anything else.

This incident jarred Lou’s sensibilities and understanding about teaching children equitably. She describes the role of racially diverse children’s books as helping to widen and deepen understanding, ‘to get rid of their ignorance a little bit’, and where black characters can provide models and negate children’s feelings of isolation.

Jessica has Muslim friends at university from whom she seeks advice on cultural issues, but would welcome a greater ethnic mix on campus. She valued the input of a former Muslim man in her teaching group because of his different viewpoint: ‘He could bring something else to the group ... it made you think about things more.’ Helena too, felt hampered by the monocultural nature of the campus and deplored the views of other students who told her of their disappointment of being placed in multi-ethnic schools.

[They] would say ‘teaching’s teaching, but I think it’s [racially-aware teaching] important ... it’s the different experience that’s important.

Coming from a racially-mixed part of the West Midlands, she is disappointed that her placements so far had been in white schools.

Implications

Overall the research highlighted three areas:

- The cultural background of beginning teachers has a significant effect on the way they perceive issues of racial diversity. Their comprehension of life has been created and shaped by their family and home communities, and now attending a white higher education institution and professional placements in white schools. This 'cultural disawareness' distances them emotionally and mentally from other ethnic groups.
- Their situation is compounded by their newness to ITE which presents a controlling curriculum and prescribed codes of teacher practice. In consequence they pursue the 'culturally known' to determine their actions and survive in this new world.
- Their cultural disawareness is not fixed. The signs of potential for re-shaping their attitudes and understanding were evident. Some life events and thought processes had sown seeds of resistance against unquestioning acceptance of white-privileged ways of being and teaching.

As a teacher educator I am drawn into a complex and challenging part of my own professional understanding. In developing courses, visiting students in school and listening to feedback and stories, I move from seeing minds unsure of or resistant to racial diversity to seeing that the forming and shaping of student teachers lies in recognising and building on what they have and already know. Their tiny unformed seeds of resistance indicate that they have the potential for valuable openness and willingness to embrace other ways of seeing. And their stories point to a need in initial teacher education to ensure that issues of race, ethnicity and equality in education are not displaced by intensive curricular demands and purportedly 'colour-blind' educational environments.

All names have been changed in this article.

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