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School exclusion: when pupils do not feel part of the school community

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School exclusion: when pupils do not feel part of the school community

Dr Caroline Howarth of the London School of Economics discusses her research into actual and perceived exclusion among ethnic minority children.

When a child is excluded from school the focus of attention often becomes fixed on the incident that led to the exclusion and on the particular individuals involved. The child, the teachers and the Head all become the focus of attention: is this a "problem child"? How did the teacher react? Was the Head's decision appropriate and fair?

While these are all important questions that do need to be asked in order to assess both the legality and the likely consequences of the exclusion, such points miss the broader cultural patterns of exclusion statistics that in turn reflect the social inequalities of multicultural Britain (Hayden and Dunne, 2001; Parsons, 1999). Recent research suggests that schools disproportionately exclude black (and other ethnic minority) children, who can be up to 15 times more likely to be excluded than their white classmates in some parts of the UK (Osler *et al,* 2002; DfES, 2003).

Feeling excluded

Extensive research (Blair, 2001; Howarth, 2004; Majors, 2001) illustrates that school exclusion can be a much more subtle and ongoing aspect of black pupils' experiences at school. Put simply, accounts collected from children, parents and teachers with experience of official exclusion from school point to an important fact: many of these children *felt* excluded from school — in feeling different, stereotyped, marginalised and discriminated against — *well before* the incident that led to their official exclusion. Hence, in making sense of exclusion patterns, we need to consider how particular messages and subtle practices at school can lead to a culture of *symbolic exclusion* which, in turn, can lead to a pupil being officially excluded from school.[1] Several pupils interviewed throughout the course of my research indicated such symbolic exclusion. For example, Tanya, a 15-year-old black girl, described her experience at a London school before she was permanently excluded:

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[1] There may be ways this analysis works for children living in poverty, children with special educational needs and traveller children – who are all also more vulnerable to school exclusion than other children, but we shall keep the focus here on the experiences of black pupils.

"My teachers said that I cannot walk about the playground with my friends. They said we were a 'gang' that intimidated the other children. But it's okay for the white girls to hang out with their friends – even if there were 10 or 20 of them! There's only 5 of us. … But, you know, in the classroom, it was like the teachers could not even see us. When I put up my hand they would just look straight through me. …. As soon as there's some noise, yeah, *then* the teachers look at the black girls."

Tanya expressed how frustrating this was and how she felt that she had to question such discriminatory behaviour and prejudiced attitudes in order to maintain her self-esteem. This, predictably, was seen to confirm the racist stereotype that she is aggressive and confrontational. When Tanya was permanently excluded, she felt that racism explained the fact that she and her black friends were excluded for alleged violent behaviour while two white girls involved in the same incident received no punishment at all. It is not particularly constructive to ask whether or not the teachers involved had "racist intent". Rather, it is important to examine how and why this young woman constructs a credible account of her experience at school and presents racism as an ongoing obstacle to her education. As those working in exclusion know already, this is a very common account and therefore needs serious consideration.

We can see from the quote that Tanya feels both highly visible (as a potential threat in the playground) and invisible (as disengaged and disinterested in the classroom). These expectations, whether or not consciously "intended", are extremely damaging. Across an array of studies (Mirza and Reay, 2000; Sewell, 1997; Wright *et al,* 2000), black pupils describe how they would welcome more encouragement from teachers, to be seen as intellectually capable across all subjects (rather then simply skilled in music, drama and sport), and to be treated with more respect. Flyn, a 15-year-old boy of mixed ethnicity, expressed to me this lack of support at school:

"The thing is I want to tell him [his teacher] I want to say to him: I can do this. I am good at this — so why aren't *you* saying that? And why don't you encourage me? But whenever I try to speak to him, it's like, like…I don't know, he just sees what he wants to hear. Like — big black guy with bad attitude. That's not me, but…I don't know, that's all he can see."

Similarly, Dani, a 15-year-old black Caribbean boy, said: I have to "keep my mouth shut and my head down" at school as "the teachers think all black boys are rude". Such expectations can lead parents and youth workers to advise black pupils to avoid attention at school in order to avoid trouble — as to be seen is to be seen *as a trouble-maker* and not as a serious and interested student. A school mentor, for example, revealed that he taught black pupils "survival at school", which was "basically to sit at the back and keep quiet". In this way, through trying to protect themselves against expectations of disruption and confrontation, they may inadvertently confirm the representation of black pupils as disengaged and anti-education. Very subtly, racist expectations and associations may filter into relations at school, impacting the way teachers and pupils interact, the way pupils position themselves, and the disproportionate numbers of black (and other ethnic minority) pupils excluded.

Take for example the 2005 case of Reinhart Appiah and Frank Wabwire, two black pupils who were excluded after being provoked into a fight with a white pupil. Although Judge Crawford Lindsay admitted that the white pupil was indeed the "initial aggressor", he went on to say that racism played no part in the decision to exclude the black pupils involved (and not the white pupil), as there was no evidence of the individual teachers having "racist intent". In this case it is clear that the ideology of individualism has affected both the decision to exclude and the evaluation of the incident; our attention is thus diverted away from the embedded cultural representations and structural inequalities that may be at play. Judge Crawford Lindsay, much to the dismay of many in the court, concluded that the national ratio of three black students excluded for every white student was not "indicative of racism".

If we are to address the problem of school exclusion adequately and, particularly, if we are to tackle the uneven cultural patterns in school exclusions, we cannot be hesitant about taking these experiences seriously and exploring the very subtle and unwitting ways in which racism operates institutionally. This should begin with an examination of complex relationship between education, culture and identity.

Towards an inclusive school culture

Education is not only about knowledge; it is about the production of knowledge, who produces that knowledge, in whose interest, who is marginalised from such processes, and how previously excluded accounts can be recovered and incorporated. In examining the operation of racism at school, we need to explore what is taught in a concrete sense and from whose perspective. How can pupils be encouraged to learn about communities, cultures, religions and histories which

adequately reflect their lives in multicultural Britain? This means more than simply teaching Black history, Islam or Judaism, though there has been much progress in these areas. This also means involving pupils, parents and communities in the production of knowledge itself.

Some schools do this very skilfully[2]. Not only are a range of histories and cultures discussed across all subjects of teaching, but children are expected to explore their own histories and teach each other about these. This means that rather than developing an unhelpfully rigid approach to different cultures (with an emphasis on *difference*), children can experience culture and history as fluid, hybrid and sometimes contested. There are many ways of being a British Muslim boy, for example, or a white girl from Northern England. Pupils benefit profoundly when they can see that they are able to construct a story of belonging, which locates them within certain cultural references, links them to their parents' and grandparents' cultures, and provides them with an attachment to Britain. This kind of approach can work as a powerful deterrent to processes of symbolic exclusion and institutional racism more generally.

Such schools which have developed an *inclusive* approach to culture and achievement — encouraging pupils to be actively involved in the production of knowledge at school and particularly involved with producing knowledge about the variances of British culture — have very few, if any, students excluded. While research across a range of localities supports this (Lloyd, Stead and Kendrick, 2001; Ofsted 2002a; Ofsted, 2002b), more extensive research into particular projects is required. Therefore, schools that are in the process of developing such an approach to inclusive cultures at schools are warmly invited to contact Dr Caroline Howarth at the London School of Economics and Political Science (via email at: *c.s.howarth@lse.ac.uk*) to aid further research into this area.

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[2] For details on particular primary and secondary schools that excel in supporting students otherwise at risk from exclusion and underachievement see Ofsted 2002a, 2002b.