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'They can't handle the race agenda': stakeholders' reflections on race and education policy, 1993-2013

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'They can't handle the race agenda': stakeholders' reflections on race and education policy, 1993-2013

Abstract

This paper explores the personal reflections of educators and contributors to policy on the shifting status of race equality in education policy in England between 1993 and 2013. The interview participants included some of the most notable figures active in race equality work in England. Part of the paper's significance is its focus on the perspectives of actors with longstanding involvement in the field of race equality, who have witnessed changes in policy over time. As 'stakeholders' with direct involvement in education policy-making and enactment, the participants tended to focus on three historic policy moments. These were: measures aimed at closing ethnic achievement gaps that began in the early 1990s; the diversity and citizenship agenda that featured in New Labour's term; the Macpherson Report (1999) and the subsequent Race Relations (Amendment) Act (2000). Participants' narratives converged in a largely pessimistic view of 1993-2013 as a period in which race equality policy had gained momentum, touched the policy mainstream - but then failed. By the end of the New Labour administration (1997-2010) and the start of the subsequent Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government (2010-2015) explicit focus on race equality in education policy had, in the views of the participants, been severely diminished.

Key words

Race; equality; diversity; multiculturalism; education policy

Introduction

> I increasingly feel… like a kind of race and ethnicity dinosaur… standing still while all these new and sexy topics are kind of rushing around me and getting lots of funding.
>
> Claire Alexander (2014)

In the past half-century race equality has rocked back and forth between the margins and the centre of education policy in England. How do educators with longstanding commitment to race equality perceive this ebb and flow? Sociologist Claire Alexander made the self-deprecating 'dinosaur' remark during a recent seminar on the voguish topic of super-diversity (Alexander and Arday, 2015) and it is hard not to sympathise with the mood of the dinosaur, the race equality veteran confronted by upstart theories and issues. In England race equality in education policy has historically been bound up with the wider role of state multiculturalism. However, in the 21st Century state multiculturalism is routinely depicted as an anachronism. For some commentators, state multiculturalism has been counter-productive, encouraging ethnic divisions and white resentment (see, for example, Goodhart 2013; Phillips, 2016). Others argue, either more optimistically or more disingenuously, that racism has declined in social salience and that multiculturalism in education and other areas of public provision is outmoded (Mirza, 2010). Commenting on this turn, Gilroy (2004) has argued that the political disavowal of state multiculturalism is rooted in a 'growing sense that it is now illegitimate to believe that multiculture can and should be orchestrated by government in the public interest' (Gilroy, 2004: 1).

Alexander's 'dinosaur' quip hinges on a distinction between the 'old' and the 'new'. However, in policy the 'old' and the 'new' are always discursive products, politically determined. Garner (2010) and Warmington (2015) have noted that the depiction of state multiculturalism as *anachronistic* is a distinctive feature in contemporary debates in England. For while, on the political right, multiculturalism has long been a folk demon, the emphasis on the anachronistic nature of state multiculturalism has provided an umbrella wherein critics of multiculturalism across the political spectrum can distance themselves from charges of being reactionary or racist, and can instead locate themselves as forward-looking. The depiction of state multiculturalism as outmoded allows the possibility that it might once have been a necessary evil, but no longer. David Cameron, Conservative prime minister between

2010 and 2016, declared of state multiculturalism that 'it is time to turn the page on the failed policies of the past' (Cameron, 2011). However, Chakrabortty (2010) has suggested that claims about the decline of racism are more a rhetorical claim to 'newness' and political vitality than a factual description of current social relationships.

Significance of the paper

This paper explores the personal reflections of interviewees - each of whom has longstanding involvement in the field of race equality - upon the shifting status of race equality in education policy in England over the twenty years between 1993 and 2013. The interview participants included some of the most influential figures in race equality work in England during that period. Their standpoints were diverse and their analyses of what drove race equality policy in education varied. Some emphasised the active role of BME communities coupled with governments' concern with being seen to respond to social discontent; others depicted government policy as a rational, evidence-based response (for example, to data on achievement gaps). However, the participants' narratives converged in a largely pessimistic view of 1993-2013 as a period in which the race equality in education policy built in momentum, touched the policy mainstream - and then failed. By the end of the New Labour administration (1997-2010) and the start of the subsequent Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government (2010-2015) explicit focus on race equality in education had, in the views of participants, been diminished; there was no longer a language in which to address race equality, to locate it within governance or within political values.

Part of the significance of this paper is its focus on the perspectives of actors who have 'hinterland', who have witnessed shifts and cycles in race equality policy over time, and who have had degrees of direct involvement in policy-making and enactment. The participants include educators; community activists; third sector workers and trade unionists. Some have held multiple roles: for example, teachers who have also taken on civil service roles; academics who have also been involved in producing policy reports or in community campaigning. Across the course of their professional lives, such actors may have moved between the margins and the centre of the policy world, depending on the wider political mood. They are, as it were, 'old hands' in the field and practice of race equality.

The value of these stakeholders' voices may be understood in terms of *phronesis*. The Greek term for practical judgement, wisdom and intelligence has been reclaimed by sociocultural

theorists such as Avis (2016) to describe how critical understandings of particular fields and practices may derive from the longevity of actors' practical experience. It refers to the kinds of situated knowledge that supports judgements embedded in 'complexity and indeterminacy at the site of practice' (Avis, 2016: 53). In short, the participants who contributed to this paper draw on knowledge that enables them to treat race not merely as a short-term policy item but with what Apple (2001: 204) has termed 'due recognition of its complexity … (as) a set of fully social relationships.'

In exploring articulations between race and education, the position of this paper is one of *race ambivalence* (Leonardo, 2005). For while race may be 'unreal' in the sense that it is not a coherent scientific category, its effects or 'modes of existence' (Leonardo, 2005: 409) are real. In other words, we live *as if* race has meaning; we live race *in practice*, experiencing the world in ways that are mediated by racialised social categories and relationships. Race *in practice* has innumerable consequences and while race intersects with other social identities, it is not sufficient merely to regard race as technology of other supposedly more 'real' relationships, such as class. Nor should research on race and education treat race as a social identity that simply exists prior to the field of education; racial identities and divisions are also produced within educational sites (including policy). It is in this sense that race is a social construction, a social relationship.

In certain instances this paper also uses the term 'ethnicity'. This is usually to reflect policy efforts to address achievement gaps between 'ethnic' categories. For example, for monitoring purposes in Britain the category 'black' will typically be disaggregated into ethnic categories such as 'black Caribbean' or 'black African'. However, as noted in *[Author]*, ethnicity is no less a social construction than race and should be treated critically. Terms such as 'ethnicity' and 'culture' have been used to acknowledge diversity while shifting away from fixed 'biological' notions of race but they have not always circumvented the old problems of the race concept, sometimes becoming just as rigid and essentialist. In Britain discourses around Muslim communities are an example of how ideas about race, ethnicity, culture and faith are co-constituted (see Kundnani, 2007; Malik, 2009).

Methods and methodology

The material analysed in the current paper derives from interviews conducted during a two-year research study funded by the Society for Educational Studies. The *Race, Racism and*

Education (RRE) study was conducted between 2013 and 2015 (in the second half of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government). It focused on education in England during the twenty-year span, 1993-2013, and its aims were twofold. Firstly, there was an interview-based strand, examining perceptions of the changing status of race equality in education policy (which is the focus of the current paper). Secondly, there was a quantitative strand, charting attainment and progression among black and minority ethnic students in compulsory, post-compulsory and higher education (covered extensively in Gillborn *et al*, forthcoming).

For the interview strand, selection of participants followed a 'key informant' model, wherein participants were selected because of their involvement in developing, enacting and evaluating race equality policy in education during the period 1993 -2013. In order to provide diversity, at the point of recruitment participants were nominally categorised as 'politicians' (for instance, former education ministers), 'senior policy-makers' (for instance, civil servants with cabinet-level involvement) and 'stakeholders'. The latter group included practitioners involved in educational leadership, community activism, the third sector, academia and trade unions. There was overlap between categories of participant: for example, there were trade unionists and academics who had been involved in government advisory groups and in producing policy reports. The importance of the 'stakeholder' group, who feature in the current paper, was that their participation ensured the study included practitioners with lengthy involvement in race and education, in some cases dating back as far as the 1970s and 1980s. This distinguished them from participants whose focus on race and education was relatively short-term. It also helped us to understand policy not only in terms of top-down government but also in terms of enactment at local levels (cf. Ball *et al*, 2012). Given the number of people nationally that might potentially have fit our key informant criteria, the 'sample' was inevitably small in scale but we were confident that it included some of the most notable figures active in race equality work during the period, including participants with decades of work in the field.

Thirty-five interviews were conducted in the *RRE* research study. Twenty-two interviewees were from BME groups (8 female, 14 male); thirteen were white British (5 female, 8 male). The current paper focuses principally on interviews with around twenty participants whom we defined at the point of recruitment as 'stakeholders'. The interviews were semi-structured, in-depth and generally lasted between forty minutes and ninety minutes. Organising themes

included interviewees' perceptions of landmarks in race equality in education and in the wider public sphere between 1993 and 2013; their involvement in education policy initiatives; their views on persistent inequalities in education; and their understandings of the influence of concepts such as cultural diversity and institutional racism on education policy. Interviews were fully transcribed and were analysed using a constant comparative method as a means identifying recurrent constructs (Thomas, 2009). This thematic analysis enabled reconstruction of participants' analyses of the shifting status of race equality in education policy. Given that the interviews concerned views on government and policy, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity were salient issues. All participants were informed that the *RRE* study focused on shifts in the place of race equality in education policy. With three exceptions (the interviewees referred to as 'Jo', 'Celia' and 'Howard'), the participants were willing to permit their real names to be used in reporting the research (.

In terms of methodology, the interviews were used as means to access the meanings that participants ascribed to their experiences of changes in race and education policy over time. Interviews were not viewed in idealised terms, as offering 'authentic' perspectives on policy history and contexts but as 'situated elements in social worlds' (Silverman, 2004: 4), narrative accounts ordered by the interviewees in order to produce representations. In short, the interviews were understood as local accomplishments, joint constructions produced by interviewer and interviewee (cf. Silverman, 2004). As such, it was necessary to acknowledge the forces mediating interviewees' voices: in particular, the retrospective nature of interviewees' accounts. However, such factors notwithstanding, our analytic standpoint was that interviewing provided credible access to the ways in which participants understood their social worlds.

Education policy context, 1993-2013

In exploring participants' retrospective views of a twenty-year period, the current paper comprises a form of oral history – and memory and hindsight play complex roles in historical research. The participants were asked to cast their minds back as far as 1993. That year is a significant marker in the history of race in England because of the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence. The Lawrence family's subsequent campaign for justice secured a public inquiry (Macpherson, 1999) that directly shaped changes in race equality legislation and made specific recommendations to address racial inequality in the public sector, including education. However, Stephen's death did not have an immediate impact on government

policy, and certainly not on the education sector. The Macpherson Report (into police handling of Stephen's murder) and the subsequent Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 (hereafter, RRAA 2000) featured significantly in participants' accounts but it is important not to treat those 'landmarks' teleologically. Moreover, in their reflections interviewees often placed emphasis on what did *not* happen: what was lacking in terms of addressing race equality in education policy. It is important, therefore, to keep a broad sense of what *was* happening, of what government's educational priorities were and how marginal issues of race and racism often were among decision-makers.

The year 1993 was mid-term in John Major's beleaguered Conservative administration. A year earlier the Education (Schools) Act 1992 had established the new schools inspectorate, Ofsted. By 1993 capital spending on schools had fallen to less than half of what it had been in the mid-1970s and the education sector saw the continuation of market-led reforms (Gillard, 2011). Education Secretary Chris Patten laid out a commitment to expanding selection in the secondary school system, to providing 'choice' and 'diversity' for parents and to addressing falling standards in literacy and numeracy. These principles formed the basis of the Education Act (1993) (Benn, 2011).

In 1997 a Labour government was returned to power in the UK for the first time in eighteen years. Refashioning the party as 'New Labour', Prime Minister Tony Blair famously announced the new government's priority as 'Education, education, education!' Summarising the scope of New Labour's education policy in a short space is unfeasible. However, Jones (2003) describes the fundamentals of New Labour's education policy as diversity of educational provision combined with a forceful regulatory system that aimed at increasing average attainment (see also Ball, 2008; Sammons, 2008). Embedded in a discourse of quality, accountability and standards but also with putative concern for social inclusion, New Labour's period of government (1997-2010) included measures such as the initiation of the National College for School Leadership, Education Action Zones, the *Every Child Matters* strategy, the academies programme and, in 2005, a five-year strategy that mentioned BME pupils just once (Ball, 2008).

The relative absence of race as an issue in the five-year strategy reflects the extent to which, by the early 21st Century, issues of race equality and multiculturalism had become 'toxic' (in the words of interviewee Professor Sally Tomlinson, whose research on race and education

dates back to her pioneering work with John Rex in the 1970s). Post-9/11, national and global antagonisms influenced education and social policy, and shaped wider debates on race equality and cultural diversity. Key events in England included 2001's disturbances in northern English towns (which news media sensationalised as 'race riots'); the London bombings of 7/7/2005; widespread urban rest in the summer of 2011, and increased media focus on immigration levels. All of these fed into popular anxieties about multiculturalism, 'self-segregation', radicalisation of young Muslims and perceived 'urban' lawlessness. Kundnani (2007) argued that the period between the Macpherson Report and 7/7 saw a pervasive backlash:

> The beginning of the 21st century marked a high point of progress against racism in Britain. Since then multicultural Britain has been under attack by government policies and vitriolic press campaigns with an intensity unmatched by anything since at least the 1970s.
>
> (Kundnani, 2007: 180)

The Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government that succeeded Labour in 2010 saw educational reform largely in terms of reshaping school structures, building on New Labour's concern with parental choice and diversity of provision, through the expansion of the academies programme and the introduction of free schools. Although social mobility remained a discursive motif (with increasing focus on low achievement among white working-class pupils), 2011 saw the abolition of Labour's Education Maintenance Allowance, a scheme designed to encourage 16-19 year olds to stay on in education. As for curriculum content, Wrigley (2015) has argued that Education Secretary (2010-2014) Michael Gove's concern with standards, attainment and refocusing on 'core' subjects largely expunged any focus on cultural diversity (a claim also made by several of the interviewees). At an international level it should also be noted that government concerns about standards and attainment have grown partly out of anxieties about the UK's performance against global benchmarks (see Baumann and Winzar, 2016).

Mainstreaming race equality

…if you looked back at the 1960s and 70s and wherever you were then, you would say we are further on than then, but we have been further on than we are now… It's

gone up and dipped and gone up and dipped. And I would say at the moment it's dipping.

(Sir Tim Brighouse, Senior Education Officer)

How did the stakeholder participants depict changes in the positioning of race equality in education policy? What did they identify as the 'ups' and the 'dips' of the 1993-2013 period? In terms of the impact of race equality concerns on education policy, three historic policy moments were repeatedly identified, salient moments at which race equality work was 'mainstreamed'.

The first of these comprised policy measures explicitly aimed at closing ethnic achievement gaps in schools. These began in piecemeal, local fashion in the early 1990s and were sustained by later strategies, such as the Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant (1999-2011), the London Challenge (2003-2011) and its extension, City Challenge (2008-2011). Secondly, there was the diversity and citizenship agenda that featured in New Labour's final term (Ajegbo *et al*, 2007). This was arguably a late incarnation of the citizenship reviews and reports on community cohesion that emerged in response to 9/11 and the urban unrest in northern English cities in 2001 (e.g. Ouseley, 2001; Cantle, 2001). Thirdly, interviewees referred to the impact of the Macpherson Report (1999), which reclaimed the concept of 'institutional racism', and the statutory duties introduced in the subsequent Race Relations (Amendment) Act (2000).

The first thing to note is that the stakeholders – including several who had been involved in policy and advisory roles - tended to reject strongly the idea that government policy was consistently committed to addressing race equality. Retrospectively, they depicted the period 2003-2013 in terms of a downward arc of emergence, momentum and retreat: apparent, for instance, in the rolling back of Macpherson's focus on institutional racism. A second thing to note is the dissonance in participants' accounts of what drove race equality policy. Those more closely aligned with community activism tended to see government action as a response to wider social antagonisms, to community demands and urban unrest. Those who had been closely involved in top-down policy, however, sometimes offered more positivistic accounts, depicting policy as being evidence-driven and emphasising the role of performance data in convincing ministers of the need for action on racial inequalities in education.

'Bottom up' and 'top down'

Research on race and education in the UK has argued that government action has often been a belated response to community campaigning or urban unrest (Grosvenor, 1997; Warmington, 2014). In the 1970s ILEA's work on multicultural education was a response to a decade and more of campaigning by London's black communities and by anti-racist teachers. In the 1980s the Scarman (1981) and Swann (1985) reports responded to major unrest in inner-cities. In the early 2000s disturbances in the north of England were followed by the Cantle Report (2001) and the Ajegbo Report (2007).

Like several other stakeholder participants, veteran human rights activist Maxie Hayles, former chair of the Birmingham Racial Attacks Monitoring Unit (BRAMU), set the scene for discussion of the 1993-2013 period by making reference to the experiences of the 1980s:

> I call them the disturbances of the 80s; I didn't call it riots …black youngsters were saying enough is enough …they took to the streets …and (under) the Tories, the education of black people then came more to the fore and policies began to be made because they knew they had problems.
>
> (Maxie Hayles, human rights activist)

What Hayles points to here is the dynamic that critical race theorists describe as 'interest convergence' (Bell, 1980). Based on analysis of US civil rights legislation, interest convergence suggests that apparently progressive moves in race equality are most likely be secured where they secure the interests of white elites as well as accommodating the demands of black communities. However, those progressive policies become vulnerable and prone to retreat when they cease to converge with elite interests. Gillborn (2014) has noted that the notion of interest convergence is frequently misunderstood. It does not 'envisage a rational and balanced negotiation between minoritized groups and white power holders, where change is achieved through the mere force of reason and logic. History suggests that advances in racial justice must be won through political protest and mobilisation that create a situation where - for white interests - taking some action against racism becomes the lesser of two evils' (Gillborn, 2014: 29).

Among some interviewees, particularly those with backgrounds in community activism and those from BME backgrounds, there was a tendency to describe race equality policies as

examples of government needing to be seen to act in response to campaigning and crisis. For example, 'Celia' (pseudonym), who described herself as a 'civil servant' but had longstanding involvement in race equality in schools, commented that calls for government action on race equality in the 1990s:

> …really reached its crescendo after Stephen Lawrence was killed …governments …need to respond to that …they can't just ignore it …because it was such a major event, there was a need to respond to that.
>
> <div align="right">'Celia' (civil servant and academic)</div>

Academic and trade union activist, Professor Gargi Bhattacharyya referred to race equality policy having been driven by 'many years of intensive activity and a great deal of quite heroic work by ordinary people in ordinary communities.' Among policy-makers, Peter Wanless, author of DfES' (2006) report on racism and school exclusions, described having worked at DfES at a time when it was responsive to community-driven research. School exclusions remain a perennial campaigning issue among black Caribbean communities and the 2006 report was tellingly titled, *Exclusion of Black Pupils: Getting it. Getting it Right*:

> '…exclusion rates, for black people, was a really iconic issue ...if you listened to what the particular parts of the black community were saying about the education system, unless and until an appropriate focus was placed on disproportionate exclusion rates …they weren't necessarily going to seriously believe that the Department was engaged and interested…'
>
> Peter Wanless (ex-Department for Education and Skills [DfES])

However, there was a parallel discourse that emphasised the top-down role of government data in driving race equality policy. This narrative did not discount wider political imperatives but it emphasised 'causal' relationships between official research evidence and subsequent policy. One example was Sir Tim Brighouse's discussion of the influence of pupil performance data. In the early 1990s, prior to the Macpherson Report, performance data by ethnicity was produced at uneven rates across England. Recalling his work as Chief Education Officer in Birmingham (1993-2002), Brighouse described the city as being ahead of many other local authorities in generating ethnic performance data, recognising its implications and developing strategies aimed specifically at closing ethnic achievement gaps.

Brighouse also described initiatives such as the London Challenge (2003-2011), developed during his subsequent period as Schools Commissioner for London (2002-07), as being supported by a robust statistical base.

Educational consultant Inderjit Dehal, who as a senior civil servant at DfES with a particular concern for race equality, led the London Challenge initiative and its regional extension, the City Challenge, also argued that the evidence on pupil performance convinced education ministers to address ethnic gaps in achievement. Labour's 'high performance/ high equity' approach (see, for example, DfES, 2005) aspired to improve general achievement, while simultaneously minimising gaps between the highest achieving and 'underachieving' groups (see critiques by e.g. Archer and Francis, 2007; Ball, 2008).

> …it became a national issue, the whole notion of gap-closing …it registered with ministers …because we were then able to shine a light on individual school performance and individual pupil performance …For the first time, we were able to …get schools and ministers to do something about it.
>
> (Inderjit Dehal, educational consultant, ex-DfES)

In these reflections education policy is seen as being at least partially self-regulating, with data 'speaking for itself' (cf. Gillborn *et al*, 2017). There is less emphasis on the kinds of political impetus that drew Brighouse to race equality as an issue. Yet Brighouse's long professional history included work with black communities during his time with ILEA in London. In Birmingham during the 1990s race equality bodies such as brap (Birmingham Race Action Partnership) lobbied for race equality to become a policy priority and their position was strengthened by the publication of Gillborn and Gipps' (1996) Ofsted report on race equality in schools (the publication of which was delayed until the intervention of the Commission for Racial Equality). It is also worth noting that ethnic performance data was only gathered nationally from 2002 (the year before the launch of the London Challenge), in direct response to the Macpherson Report and the RRAA (2000). In unpacking the 'evidence' discourse, therefore, ethnic performance data might best be described as a *tool* for policy-makers to address race equality, rather than as a driver *per se*.

Equity and performance

However, if race equality policy was momentarily buoyed by New Labour's 'high performance/ high equity' agenda, contradictions soon became apparent. For, as Ball (2008) has pointed out, improving overall performance and closing ethnic gaps are not the same thing and do not necessarily occur in tandem. Archer and Francis (2007) argued that by the latter half of New Labour's administration, high performance had taken precedence over closing ethnic gaps (see also Tomlinson, 2005). As the influence of Macpherson faded, race equality issues tended to be framed in terms of tackling 'under-achievement'; the direct focus on institutional racism urged in Macpherson (1999) and the Race Relations (Amendment) Act (2000) was superseded by a 'colour-blind' take on educational standards (see Alexander and Arday, 2015).

Several participants pointed to a shift in emphasis between performance and equity in education policy between Macpherson and the end of the New Labour government in 2010. Sir Keith Ajegbo, educational consultant, former head teacher and author of the DfES review, *Diversity and Citizenship in the Curriculum* (Ajegbo *et al*, 2007), commented on the diminishing of race equality criteria in Ofsted's inspection remit and the consequent slippage of race equality work in schools. Ajegbo argued that the *Diversity and Citizenship* report, commissioned under Prime Minister Tony Blair (1997-2010), set an agenda for citizenship education in which cultural diversity and social justice were integral. Importantly, the citizenship agenda was supported by Ofsted's infrastructure. As such, said Ajegbo, it was deemed to be 'inside' school standards criteria, an area in which Ofsted inspectors took interest.

However, under Blair's successor Gordon Brown (2007-2010) the emphasis on plurality in the citizenship agenda was displaced by a putative focus on 'British values' (see Osler, 2009). This represented a significant retreat. There was also a suggestion by at least two interviewees (one a former Education minister) that head teachers' lobbies played a role in the marginalisation of race equality issues towards the end of the Labour government. Civil servant 'Celia' participated in focus groups with influential head teachers:

> …head teachers …used to come and advise (DfES). I remember this conversation … that race wasn't such a big issue. Things had 'changed'. Things were changing sufficiently and it wasn't such a big issue.
>
> ('Celia', civil servant and academic)

The deprioritising of race equality in the latter part of the New Labour administration was also referred to in an interview with civil servant Peter Wanless, who reflected on the fate of his report on black children and school exclusions. *Getting It; Getting It Right* (DfES, 2006) was enthusiastically received by black parents and campaigners but, in Wanless' view, remained marginal to DfES' work on achievement and school improvement and therefore did not garner the 'intensive kind of follow-through' needed to embed policy. Community-driven approaches to race and education had become squeezed by the universal focus on literacy and numeracy within the school improvement strategy:

> …it wasn't sufficiently connected to a central drive of Government policy and priorities …If the report had been on doubling A-grades at maths …politicians would have leapt all over (it).
>
> (Peter Wanless, ex-DfES)

From New Labour to the Coalition

If *Diversity and Citizenship* retained some small purchase within schools and the inspection framework in the latter days of New Labour, under the succeeding Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition (2010-2015) the relationship between citizenship and cultural diversity was severed – and, very significantly, Ofsted's focus on race equality was removed.

> …from 2007 almost until 2010… (I was) rushing all over the place… talking to people about …*Citizenship and Diversity* and …the ideas that we had about race and community. But it was very interesting. Directly it became evident that the Coalition weren't going to have that as part of Ofsted, and that it was no longer so important for schools …then those invitations dried up.

> …to get an outstanding Ofsted, you had to have a high percentage of A to Cs and good SATs results, and (citizenship and race equality work) didn't particularly contribute to that.
>
> (Sir Keith Ajegbo, educational consultant, former head teacher)

Interviewee Ted Cantle, author of the Home Office's Community Cohesion report, commissioned in the wake of 2001's disturbances in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley, attributed Ofsted's deprioritising of issues around cultural diversity and citizenship to the influence of Conservative Education Secretary, Michael Gove:

> …the government …took it out of the Ofsted agenda... I think, personally, (Gove) didn't understand …didn't believe it …and the reason he gave was that he wanted schools to concentrate on the key performance targets – Maths, English, Science – and any of this wider education stuff should be ditched... he created a very, very narrow agenda').
>
> Ted Cantle (Institute of Community Cohesion)

The *RRE* study included an interview with 'Jo', an Ofsted inspector. 'Jo' also attested to shift in the status of race within Ofsted's framework in the period described by Ajegbo. In the immediate post-Macpherson period (after 1999-2000) every registered Ofsted inspector was required to complete a training course on inclusion that included reading anti-racist research (and being tested on it). Under the Coalition race appeared in the Ofsted framework only as a footnote reference as a possible area that inspectors might choose to examine. This suggested something more than an attitudinal shift; rather, there had been a conscious dismantling of the infrastructures that supported race equality policy in education, hastened by the Coalition's remodelling of the standards agenda and by what one interviewee described as 'generic', 'pseudo-scientific' models of school improvement ('...over the last five years the focus has completely gone …race …or any type of equality just isn't a factor.').

'Post-racial' and 'colour-blind'

> …persistent inequalities still exist … but because black kids, particularly in London, are getting higher grades …people think it's all good and it's all right …but we know that they're being excluded at high rates …that they're being diagnosed or …statemented with special educational needs at a higher rate. We know that they're less likely to get employment, more likely to get into the criminal justice system. So, you can't take one thing in isolation and say, 'Yeah… we've got it licked.'
>
> (Derek Bardowell, ex-Stephen Lawrence Trust)

Perhaps the most pervasive feature of the interviews was the perception among stakeholders that, within both mainstream political and educational debate, issues of race and racism were considered done and dusted. Race equality issues were marginalised not just because they were perceived by policy-makers as outside of or inimical to 'quality' and 'standards' but also because they were regarded as anachronistic, as having been dealt with. Maxie Hayles commented:

> There's a fallacy that we live in a post racial era and that's dangerous. It's dangerous because racism is not '*if* or *but*'; it's an inevitable process and we're not going to get utopia.
>
> (Maxie Hayles, human rights activist)

The term 'post-racial' is problematic because it has been used to signify very different, some would say opposing, claims about the social salience of race and racism. For some commentators, the 'post-racial' denotes complex social analyses that engage with anti-essentialism (Leonardo, 2011). However, others, both in academia and politics, have used the term to claim boldly – and more simplistically - that racism has declined as a feature of social life. Note, for instance, the somewhat haughty terms used in 2012 by then UK Prime Minister David Cameron in 2012 to dismiss, as unnecessary effort, the equalities impact tests introduced in the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000: 'We have smart people in Whitehall who consider equalities issues while they're making the policy. We don't need all this extra tick-box stuff' (Cameron, cited in BBC, 2012).

One of the most striking remarks made in the project interviews was voiced by Baroness Doreen Lawrence. As a result of her family's lengthy campaign over police mishandling of the investigation of her son's murder, Lawrence has in many ways become an iconic figure, elevated to the House of Lords and publicly lauded for her campaigning work around racial justice. Yet her comments on the status of race equality policy in the Coalition period were unambiguous:

> '…race isn't on the Government agenda, they don't address race whatsoever.'
>
> (Baroness Doreen Lawrence, campaigner and writer)

This was a conclusion echoed in a comment on the Coalition government by 'Howard', a youth worker and former advisor to Boris Johnson during the latter's term as London Mayor (2008-16):

> 'They can't handle the race agenda. They have no language for it. It's outside of their skill set, even their values.'
>
>   'Howard' (youth worker, former mayoral advisor)

Participants suggested that this 'fallacious' but powerful 'post-racial' discourse operated by portraying concerns about race equality as outmoded, as an anxiety from which society needed to 'move on'. Anti-racism was increasingly associated in public debate with the past, with unnecessary discontent and with special pleading. Joy Warmington, CEO of the Birmingham's independent equalities and human rights organisation *brap* commented:

> It's almost like we felt as a society that we'd done the equality stuff, we'd done the race equality stuff…
>
>   (Joy Warmington, CEO, *brap* equalities and human rights)

If the race equality 'stuff' has been 'done', then it can become located a bogus concern. Professor Heidi Safia Mirza, an academic and appointee to New Labour's task force on educational standards in 1997, commented on the way in which 'colour-blind' discourses work to impugn the motives of those arguing for continued action against racial inequality:

> …there is this sense in which …race is (seen as) something that only the bitter and twisted talk about, only the disillusioned, only those who want a special handout, only those who want special favours… I think that's the common sense kind of way in which it works out: that we're kind of *post-equality because we've achieved equality.*
> (Professor Heidi Safia Mirza, academic, former advisor on educational standards)

Participants identified phenomena that they felt were commonly used to imply 'closure' on race issues. These included improvements in attainment in London schools (as noted by Derek Bardowell, above); the visibility of an emergent BME middle-class in the UK; even the presidency of Barack Obama. Gargi Bhattacharyya identified an inversion mobilised to

regulate discussion of racial inequality, whereby - in an ostensibly 'post-racial' world - those who contest racism are depicted as the source of the problem:

> …the discourse of anti-essentialism and the constructedness of race has been so effectively taken over by the other side that to name racism becomes racist … If you say, 'this is racism' that means all you can see is race. '*I* don't see race. *You* see race because you're a racist' … The script has been very effective in terms of silencing discussion of racism …and I think (that) has been very eagerly taken up by people in authority …because it allows… things to be returned to interpersonal relations and racism to not be spoken about and nothing about institutional practice to be spoken about.
>
> <div align="right">(Professor Gargi Bhattacharyya, trade unionist and academic)</div>

Her argument is comparable with arguments made by, for instance, by Khan (2016) in the UK (and Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich, 2011, in the USA) that social construction theses originally developed as critical analyses of race have increasingly been employed to justify a strategic 'colour-blindness'. In short, if race is taken as an 'unreal' category, then attempts to understand social inequalities in terms of race are invalid, misguided or simply inverse racism. Anti-racism becomes, at best, a political dinosaur, and at worst, the hobby horse of the bitter and twisted.

Macpherson: rise and fall?

Some participants suggested that the evasion of issues of race and racism was a default position, strongly embedded in England's policy sphere. They suggested pessimistically that education and social policy would always seek return to a racialised status quo, maintaining racial inequality at manageable levels ('racism is not *if* or *but*; it's an inevitable process', Maxie Hayles). Other participants, including Gargi Bhattacharyya; veteran activist Professor Gus John (Director of the Communities Empowerment Network and former Director of Education for Hackney, East London), Rob Berkeley (Director of independent race equality think tank, Runnymede Trust, 2009-14) and Sally Tomlinson (academic and former teacher and social worker) focused on more historically specific periods of retreat. These included perceived failure to build upon specific policy, such as the Macpherson Report and subsequent the Race Relations (Amendment) Act (2000).

Gillborn (2008) has argued that the public sector duties initiated by the RRAA (2000) comprised the most powerful ever manifestation of race equality policy in Britain. Almost all of the stakeholder interviewees reflected on the impact of the RRAA (2000), both in terms of specific policy and in terms of its wider impact on public debate. One of the reasons that Macpherson resonated with many stakeholders was the report's willingness to name institutional racism. However, embrace of the concept within organisations was followed, some suggested, by a bureaucratic appropriation that produced more rhetoric than action. They recognised the value of Macpherson's initial definition of institutional racism, insofar as it interrogated organisational cultures and structures, as opposed merely to condemning individual prejudice. Over time, however, the RRAA (2000)'s bureaucratic approaches to examining practices encouraged superficial, performative responses:

> …for many organisations and individuals …like ourselves …that had been arguing that [racism] is more than just the odd individual here and there, it was really good to be able to 'out' organisations in a sense - but I think we were very simplistic about the mechanism that we were going to use to address such a complex issue and that's the problem, you know, the complexity.
>
> (Joy Warmington, CEO, *brap* equalities and human rights)

Gargi Bhattacharyya also claimed that bureaucratisation had had a deleterious effect upon anti-racist action in the workplace, not least in schools, colleges and universities:

> …I really feel like there's a whole generation of activists who after the Macpherson Report came out …got buried in paperwork for more than a decade, in order to try and pursue what institutional racism meant in our various… organisations …because what it created was the opportunity for a highly bureaucratised response to the accusation of institutional racism … Of course, we should have known it. We said, 'Oh, what we need is …bureaucratic machinery' and what they said is, 'You think you know about bureaucratic machinery? We'll show you bureaucratic machinery!'
>
> (Professor Gargi Bhattacharyya, trade unionist and academic)

There was a suggestion that the RRRA (2000) got stuck at operational and middle-management levels, without impinging significantly at the strategic level of, for instance,

local authorities or universities. For Rob Berkeley (formerly Runnymede Trust), the effect of this bureaucratic turn was that organisations became practiced in making performative responses to race equality issues: contrition, but little practical change. Berkeley referred to:

> … a farcical …moment of various institutions saying, 'we're institutionally racist'… it seemed to be fashionable to claim institutional racism. It didn't seem to be that fashionable to do very much about it.
>
> (Rob Berkeley, Director of Runnymede Trust, 2009-14)

Gus John, one of the most experienced of the participants, whose research and campaigning on race issues stretches back to the late 1960s, spoke in similar terms to Berkeley, noting that 'for many being institutionally racist was like a badge of honour …We've held our hands up. We admit it and we're working towards goodness.' Academic Heidi Safia Mirza also offered a revisionist take on the 'iconic' place of Macpherson and the RRAA (2000):

> …it's meant to be this iconic moment but …it solidified racism in new ways. We had the …speech acts, performativity of anti-racism …(Organisations) invoke the term 'institutional racism' …they're seen as 'doing' race and that means …they've tackled the issue …the technologies of concealment become more difficult to reveal because the language is there but the very policy mechanisms themselves, have solidified racism. So, we're in this Catch 22.
>
> (Professor Heidi Safia Mirza, academic, former advisor on educational standards)

Rob Berkeley suggested that by the end of the decade that began with the RRAA (2000), the limits of Macpherson's impact had become apparent:

> …there's an important moment ten years on from the Lawrence enquiry …in 2009, just a realisation that despite a lot of talk and a lot of effort from some, actually the outcomes hadn't changed. So, the stickiness of the political system and the institutions towards change, I think, is instructive.
>
> (Rob Berkeley, Director of Runnymede Trust, 2009-14)

What was being suggested in these accounts of the period after Macpherson? Is it that Macpherson was ineffective because of its inherent flaws, its tendency to bureaucratic

inertia? Or is that, in fact, Macpherson and the RRAA (2000) threatened to become all too effective in addressing racial inequalities? In going where Swann and Scarman had not, in naming institutional racism, did Macpherson become a political liability, subject to backlash against 'multiculturalism'? Certainly, in the view of some participants, Macpherson and the RRAA (2000) had opened up spaces to address institutional racism but by 2013 education policy had retreated to a pre-Macpherson position:

> …go back to Macpherson …at that point you got the recognition of institutionalised racism …institutionalised inequality, and so you were able to have those conversations and you were able to argue to do things about them. All of that's eroded. You know, again if you raise that issue you're again thought of as a mad person, which you probably were prior to Macpherson.
>
> (Inderjit Dehal, educational consultant, ex-DfES)

> …that post-Stephen-Lawrence phase was a period of awareness. And I think we've gone back since then. We might even be in a worse place. Because before Stephen Lawrence, black people were visible as the possible recipients of racism. Now they're actually invisible as the possible recipients of racism...
>
> ('Celia', civil servant and academic)

For interviewees such as Professor Sally Tomlinson, a pioneer in research on race and education in Britain, the silence on race equality in education policy was neither accidental nor simply due to a lack of managerial skill but a deliberate political retreat. Discussion of race, let alone institutional racism, has become too politically costly:

> …the immigration debate has made any notion of discussing race, immigration, refugees, asylum seekers, whatever, it's a toxic brew and so I think at the moment we're really caught in that and those of us who have been in it a long time are, I think, …quite horrified.
>
> (Professor Sally Tomlinson, academic, researcher on race and SEN)

In addition to contemporary 'toxic' debates on immigration, asylum and multiculturalism, interviewees such as Gargi Bhattacharyya and Patrick Roach (Deputy General Secretary of teachers' union NASUWT) referred to the (re)emergence in education and social policy of a

discourse of 'white working-class' failure and a parallel discourse of derision around multiculturalism (see analyses by, for example, Garner, 2010; Warmington and Grosvenor, 2011). Increasingly dominant since the early 2000s, this policy discourse holds that white working-class children are the fraction most poorly served by schools – and that their position has been exacerbated by the supposed priority given to BME pupils' achievement in the 1980s and 1990s. For Bhattacharyya, this is a nativist discourse - one in which there is discursive and material contest over the entitlement to resources such as education. ('White people are still being badly served because all regular people are being badly served but then that becomes available as a kind of counter-rhetoric, in order to say, "Oh look, these… darkies taking up all the public space… they're getting more than us."'). For Gus John, this pattern of retreat from radical action on race is long entrenched in politics and policy:

> …governments throughout the decades have had one eye on what they consider to be the responsible and moral thing to do and one eye on making sure that the rest of the population didn't feel that they were being taken out of their comfort zone…
>
> (Gus John, Communities Empowerment Network)

John's conclusion was a restatement of perhaps the most pervasive theme of the stakeholder interviews: that the vagaries of race equality policy in education could only be understood in relation to the wider politics of race, the wider history of race in Britain.

Conclusion

In the project interviews the 'stakeholder' participants depicted the 1990s as a time in which race equality concerns became imperfectly embedded in education policy. However, the race equality momentum achieved in the immediate aftermath the Macpherson Report (1999) was, if not erased, then severely diminished by 2010. The stakeholders suggested that Britain has entered not a post-racial field but a field in which education and social policy discourses have largely been de-racialized (cf. Warmington, 2014). This rolling back – in education and in the broader public space - has left little space for critical understandings of race and racism.

In terms of future research the key implication of this paper is the need to examine the state of contemporary education in the 'post-multicultural' context, through a critical race-conscious lens. In recent years 'colour-blind' approaches to research and policy have

dominated and crude aggregate ethnic categories have increasingly been employed in annual education statistics. The project interviews suggest that the de-racialisation of research and policy has led to a slippage in tackling racial inequalities. It is true that the proportion of all students achieving at least five higher grade GCSEs almost doubled between 1993 and 2013 (Gillborn *et al*, 2017). However, minority ethnic groups have not benefitted equally. In particular, black Caribbean and mixed race: white/black Caribbean pupils have experienced significant inequalities of achievement. Moreover, Gillborn *et al* (2017) have found that the scale of racial inequalities has been directly and negatively affected by changes in education policy and the redefinition of the GCSE benchmark. Each time the government has altered the GCSE benchmark (in 2006 and 2011) there has been immediate and negative impact on race inequality, affecting each of the major minority ethnic groups, most of all black students. Beyond schools, there is a need to investigate racialised gaps in attainment and access to high status programmes in further/ vocational education and higher education.

What the voices in the current paper offer in critical terms are not dinosaur relics but a powerful counter-narrative to the kind of education policy rhetoric that, according to Archer and Francis (2007: 1), 'denies racism as a potential cause of differences in achievement and hides inequalities within congratulatory public statements.' The narratives explored here are sometimes pessimistic but that very pessimism may generate critical questions about the standing of race in education policy. For race does not simply disappear from policy discourse. Ostensibly colour-blind policy may still rest upon deeply racialized notions, even if it does not name race and racism.

Acknowledgments

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