

## MINORITY ETHNIC PUPILS IN MAINLY WHITE SCHOOLS

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### Introduction

Most research on the education of minority ethnic pupils has focused on multiethnic schools in urban areas (i.e. schools with a substantial proportion of minority ethnic pupils). This study investigated the situation of minority ethnic pupils in mainly white schools. Many more teachers and schools than in the past now have some minority ethnic pupils. The report highlights factors that might affect the educational achievements of these pupils and examines the perspectives on the situation of minority ethnic pupils and parents as well as their teachers.

For the purposes of the research, a "mainly white school" was defined as a school in which only 4 - 6% of pupils were from minority ethnic backgrounds. The fact that there are so few minority ethnic pupils on roll presents major challenges in conducting research in this field. Firstly, with very few minority ethnic pupils in each cohort the effectiveness of individual schools cannot be measured reliably in terms of that group's educational performance. Secondly, it is not possible to study variations in performance between children from different minority ethnic backgrounds, even though substantial variations between groups have been recorded in urban settings. The key findings that are outlined below should be interpreted with caution, keeping these points in mind.

### Key findings

- A survey of the performance of over 34,000 pupils in mainly white schools in 35 LEAs indicated that children from a White background in mainly white schools outperformed those in urban multiethnic schools in Key Stage 2 SATs and GCSE exams - presumably because these schools were in socially more advantaged areas.
- Children from Black Caribbean, Indian and Pakistani backgrounds in the same schools also outperformed their urban counterparts at GCSE level but *not* at the end of Key Stage 2. Children from minority ethnic backgrounds shared in whatever educational advantages were available in these schools to the same degree as children from a White background in secondary school but not in primary school.
- In many schools and LEAs this data was either not available or unreliable, mainly because of uncertainties around the recording of pupils' ethnic background.
- Individual interviews in fourteen mainly white schools indicated that aspects of ethnicity were central in the pupils' self-identification. But there was considerable variation in how far they would have liked to see their ethnic identity expressed more fully and openly at school. Schools face a challenging task in attempting to respect this range of views.
- A significant proportion of the minority ethnic pupils reported race-related name calling or verbal abuse at school or while travelling to and from school. For example, in the questionnaire survey 26% said that they had had such experiences during the previous week.
- No school in this sample had a fully developed strategy for preparing pupils through the curriculum for life in a diverse society. Presented with alternative ideals of how diversity might be treated, most informants saw their school or class as trying to treat all children equally and playing down ethnic and cultural differences. A minority of schools or classrooms in this sample were seen as partially adopting the alternative stance of stressing and valuing cultural diversity.
- Teaching provision for children in the early stages of learning English as an additional language (EAL) was variable, and no school had a strategy in place for supporting children with EAL beyond the initial stages.

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- Teachers reported that, in most cases, the issues with which this research was concerned had not been covered either in their initial training or in any recent in-service training.

## Background

By 1996/97 all secondary schools and three quarters of primary schools had at least some minority ethnic pupils, but in over two thirds of all schools the proportion of minority ethnic pupils was less than 5%. There are only eight small LEAs that have very few or no schools with a significant proportion of minority ethnic pupils (more than 4%). These are located exclusively in the North East, South and West regions. The great majority of teachers across the country may now expect to work with minority ethnic pupils at some point in their career, and mainly white schools in almost all areas may expect to admit minority ethnic pupils more frequently than in the past.

## Research questions

The key research questions were:

- Are there differences in levels of educational achievement between minority ethnic children in mainly white schools and children from the same ethnic backgrounds in multiethnic schools?
- Do perceptions and experiences of the school learning environment and home support differ between minority and majority ethnic children in mainly white schools?
- How do children and young people from minority ethnic groups see/experience their lives in mainly white schools?
- Do children from minority ethnic backgrounds experience race-related harassment and bullying in the schools, what measures are taken to protect them, and what level of confidence do they and their families have in what is done?
- How do minority ethnic parents and children see the relationship between their home culture and the children's school culture and between their home culture and the ethos of the neighbourhood where they live?
- How do teachers in the schools view the education of children and young people from minority ethnic groups? Are there areas of knowledge, competencies and resources that they perceive as essential but feel they do not have?
- To what extent do curricula, school ethos and classroom practices reflect the diversity of society as a whole and meet the needs and interests of all children in the schools, including those from minority ethnic backgrounds?

## Methodology

To address these questions the research was conducted in three parts. Part 1 focused on the questions about educational performance. LEAs with significant numbers of mainly white schools were approached to provide data on Key Stage 2 and GCSE results in all schools in the authority's area with 4 - 6% minority ethnic pupils. The survey involved the collation of results obtained by over 34,000 pupils in 35 local authority areas.

Parts 2 and 3 focused on a small sample of 14 schools in four regions of the country. These schools each had 4 - 6% minority ethnic pupils but otherwise varied in size, type of catchment area and performance. We worked with Years 3 - 6 in primary schools and Years 7 - 9 in secondary schools. In Part 2 both white and minority ethnic pupils in that age range completed a questionnaire survey that explored their perceptions of life at school and of home support for their education. Part 3 focused on minority ethnic children exclusively. We interviewed 61 pupils in Years 3 - 9, one or both of their parents (in most cases) and a sample of 77 of their teachers. Apart from class teachers, form tutors and/or heads of year, we met with head or deputy head teachers and the teachers in each school responsible for Mathematics, Religious Education and Physical Education. The pupils came from a range of minority ethnic groups, including a significant proportion of children who had a mixed heritage background, reflecting the composition of the minority ethnic population of the schools.

## Principal findings from interviews in fourteen case study schools

### *Children and families*

1. For the children we interviewed the most important features of their ethnic self-characterisation stemmed from their families. A sense of ethnic identity was promoted by most parents through teaching their children their home language or religious and cultural values and through involving them in contacts with and visits to networks of relatives and friends from the same ethnic background. An additional factor influencing how they saw their ethnic identity was the way in which they and other members of their ethnic group were perceived and treated outside the home.
2. Two thirds of the children had some exposure to a community language within the household. Among those parents who were bilingual most would have liked their children to become fluent speakers of their own first language. Few of the children were on track to do so, unless they had themselves come to

the UK from overseas with a fluent command of the language already established.

3. Participation in community religious education featured prominently in the daily lives of many Muslim children in the sample and played a part in the weekly routines of children from some other faith traditions. Regular attendance posed considerable challenges to those living at a distance from a centre of religious life, and a number of parents made individual, private arrangements to overcome these problems.
4. Mixed heritage children form a significant group among the minority ethnic population of mainly white schools. Many parents believed that this heritage posed additional difficulties for their child's development of a clear sense of identity. Some referred to the risk of black and white partners' children not being accepted within either community. Our discussions with the teachers rarely showed that they were aware of the parents' concerns and suggested that their uncertainties about the treatment of all minority ethnic pupils were most acute with mixed heritage children.

#### *Social integration and racism*

5. The majority of the children who had been at their school for a significant length of time were well integrated socially and enjoyed the same range of patterns of friendship within their peer group as would be expected of any other children in these schools. In addition, a minority had a small network of acquaintances from their own ethnic community either at school or based on their parents' network at home.
6. While very few of those we interviewed had been physically harassed in racist incidents, over a third of the children reported experiences of hurtful name calling and verbal abuse either at school or during the school journey. For around half of these the harassment was continuing or had continued over an extended period of time.
7. Official procedures to reduce race-related bullying relied on children and parents to report any problems that occurred, but strong factors undermined their willingness or ability to do so. Consequently, in most of the schools some of the children and parents put little trust in the official reporting procedures, preferring to rely on their own resources, such as the protection of an older sibling.

#### *Schools*

8. In this sample of schools the Religious Education curriculum reflected the diversity of contemporary society more fully than any other aspect of the school curriculum. Pupils and parents responded positively both to teaching about their own religion and to the opportunities that were given for children to learn about other faith traditions.
9. As noted above, no school in this sample had a fully developed strategy for preparing pupils through the curriculum for life in a diverse society. The teachers we interviewed did not see any recent development at national level as encouraging a focus on this area of work. Moreover, until very recently Ofsted inspections of the schools did not appear to have stimulated thinking on how the curriculum might address diversity to that end. This issue had been addressed during the most recent school inspections and is now a theme in the National Curriculum programmes of study in Citizenship.
10. Few of the schools had admitted many pupils in recent years who had needed additional support because they were learning English as an additional language. Teaching provision varied markedly in those schools which did need it with some reliance on ad hoc arrangements and on staff with expertise in special educational needs. But there were also examples of schools making effective use of advice and support from LEA specialist teaching services.
11. While some primary schools operated a "language across the curriculum" strategy, no school had a strategy in place for supporting children learning EAL beyond the initial stages. The longer term language development needs of such pupils were not given attention by the teachers who spoke with us, and none described strategies for supporting and enhancing their proficiency and confidence in using English for academic purposes.

#### *Teachers*

12. The mainly white pupil population of the schools was served by an almost entirely white teaching staff. Across the 14 schools in the sample there were only three minority ethnic teachers at the time of the study. A number of head teachers and other staff argued that there would be many advantages to their school in having teachers from a wider range of cultural backgrounds on the staff.
13. Very few of the teachers whom we interviewed spoke with knowledge or confidence about issues relating to multicultural education. Those who did had usually had experience in a school in a multiethnic area in the past, but more than a third had very little or no such experience to draw on.

14. There was no evidence that either initial training or in-service training had prepared the staff of the schools for the challenges of diversity that they can expect to meet with increasing frequency in the future. The teachers were interviewed before the introduction of programmes of study in Citizenship within the National Curriculum, and very few of them reported that they had attended recent courses or staff development programmes that covered issues of diversity. The focus of a large proportion of recent staff development had been central government initiatives and curriculum/syllabus change with a different emphasis.

### **Examples of good practice in schools**

During our work in the case study schools we learned of a range of strategies that had been adopted to address some of the challenges that we have described. The following examples of good practice appeared to be worth highlighting here.

#### ***Reducing race-related bullying and name calling***

- Most of the schools agreed about some aspects of good practice in dealing with race-related bullying and name-calling - investigating the incident fairly, making sure that perpetrators understood what they had done wrong, and informing parents when children were involved in persistent or malicious abuse.
- Schools were more likely to win the confidence of minority ethnic parents and children in their ability to deal with racism when the head teacher personally was seen to deal with such matters firmly themselves and to provide a lead for others on the issue. This confidence was enhanced when care was taken to inform victims and their parents of the outcome of any follow-up to a report of racist behaviour.
- All schools relied on victims and their families reporting problems to teachers. In one school with a supportive ethos effective use was made of an anonymous "Bullying Box" where children could post messages that would receive staff attention within 24 hours.
- While families rely on informal rather than formal reporting and management of racist incidents, whole family admissions policies helpfully promote sibling support.
- The secondary school where most parents and children had some degree of trust in the school's commitment to tackling race-related bullying and name calling had a formal procedure in place for

recording incidents in a "Racist Incident Book", alongside its general record of bullying problems. This permanent school record of serious incidents served to facilitate common approaches to victims and perpetrators by different members of staff and laid the basis for a systematic quality review of procedures and for the review of trends over time.

- A key objective for many teachers was to encourage individuals to reflect carefully on incidents of race-related bullying or name-calling in which they had been the perpetrator. Strategies that were employed generally in a school were sometimes put to effective use for this purpose. Examples included individual "Thinking Sheets" which had to be seen and signed by parents and had a section where the child was required to write about why what they had done had been wrong. Some teachers also used "Circle Time" to encourage groups to reflect on such incidents.

#### ***Curriculum issues and the learning environment***

- The school that had made most progress towards developing a strategy for preparing pupils through the curriculum for life in a diverse society had not only invested in appropriate resources, but had also put a curriculum team structure in place to support this work.
- All children are a resource for their peers' learning, and children from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds form a resource of great potential value in schools where their experience and knowledge are not widely shared. Teaching which drew on this resource sensitively was seen by our informants as effective in conveying its planned curriculum content and as contributing to the development of mutual respect and understanding between ethnic groups.
- There was appreciation and respect among our informants for those schools which complemented their multi-faith religious education curriculum by holding some school assemblies that focused on other faith traditions besides Christianity. When this happened, minority ethnic pupils from the tradition concerned were more likely to value the event highly if it was led by a staff member or visitor speaking as a member of that faith community.
- Most of the schools had little experience of working with children who were in the early stages of learning English as an additional language. They frequently benefited from support given by their LEA's specialist teaching service to staff who were given time for this purpose, including learning support assistants.

- A significant proportion of the children whom we interviewed had started their present school or their previous school at a different time from most other pupils. Children and parents responded positively when:
  - schools appointed peer mentors with well-defined tasks and some preparation for them;
  - made effective arrangements for occasional or regular interpreting if children were at the early stages of learning English;
  - organised unobtrusive support from a classroom assistant in a primary school classroom.

### **Conclusion**

At present mainly white schools do not adequately prepare their pupils for adult life in a society that is culturally and ethnically diverse. That is unlikely to change unless greater priority is given to that goal in national education policies and curriculum development. In working towards this end it is important that diversity within the minority ethnic population is respected. "One size fits all" solutions would create additional problems for the minority ethnic pupils and parents who participated in this study. In the current situation many

children "play white" and many teachers minimise the significance and the value of cultural and ethnic diversity. Moving forward from that situation will require that teachers in mainly white schools are supported towards a fuller understanding of the range of backgrounds and perspectives that are represented in the more and more dispersed minority ethnic population of England in the 21st century.

### **Further Information**

*Copies of the full report (RR365) - priced £4.95 - are available by writing to DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ.*

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