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Award Holders: Dr. S. Virdee, Prof. T. Modood, Prof. T. Newburn, Ms. C. Shaw

Title: Understanding racial harassment in school

Full Report on Research Activities and Results
2 Full Report of Research Activities

Background

Despite the fact that there has been an increasing amount of work looking at racist harassment in general (see Virdee 1995; 1997; Witte 1996; Bowling 1998), it remains the case that relatively little is known about the problem in school. To date, much of the work on racist harassment in schools has comprised a rather heated discussion about its extent. On the one hand, studies carried out by Smith and Tomlinson (1989) and Foster (1990) suggest that racist harassment plays no significant part in structuring the lives of minority school-children whilst on the other hand, the work of Gillborn (1990; 1993), Mac an Ghaill (1988) and Wright (1986) suggests that racist harassment is a regular fact of life for most South Asian pupils.

Whilst recognising the undoubted importance of this on-going debate, it is nevertheless the case that we know far less about the social factors that would help us to explain why racism becomes an important negative signifier of difference at school and why some people engage in racist harassment. To date, the most relevant work in this area has been undertaken by Troyna and Hatcher (1991; 1992) and Connolly (1995; 1998). Troyna and Hatcher’s (1991; 1992) work in predominantly white primary schools contended that the ‘social structural disposition toward racist harassment’ could only be understood by carrying out an examination of the inter-relationship between structural, political/ ideological, cultural, institutional, sub-contextual, biographical and interactional factors. Adapting the concepts of habitus, capital and field employed by the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, Connolly (1998) argues that racist discourses are activated and drawn upon by pupils in the context of on-going struggles to acquire and secure the different types of capital available in the arena of the school. Whilst important, the work of Troyna and Hatcher (1991; 1992) and Connolly (1995; 1998) is limited in so far as it concentrates its attention on pupils of primary school age – a limitation that the present study overcomes.
Another key feature of work on racist harassment in schools is the widely differing definitions of racist harassment employed. On the one hand, there are those who, using quantitative methods, focus fairly narrowly on discrete acts of physical assault (Smith and Tomlinson 1989) and/or name-calling (Kelly 1988). On the other hand, qualitative researchers have tended to see racist harassment as potentially comprising a broad set of inter-related behaviours encompassing name-calling, threats, and other forms of intimidatory and aggressive behaviour, damage to property and physical assault against the person (Gillborn 1990; Troyna and Hatcher 1992; Gillborn 1993).

The present study extends this important work by exploring what behaviours minority pupils themselves conceive of as constituting racist harassment and investigating the factors which help to explain why definitions of racist harassment may vary amongst individual pupils. Relatedly, the extent to which the character of racist harassment was affected by individual and institutional circumstances was also explored. Importantly, minorities are not just ‘victims’ of racist harassment and stereotyping but active agents who shape and articulate particular responses to accommodate and resist these processes of racialisation and racism (Mac an Ghaill 1988). This study attempted to map the ways in which they do so in school.

Objectives

One of the main objectives of the study was to identify those social factors that help to explain why ‘race’ can become an important negative signifier of difference at school and, relatedly, why some people engage in racist harassment. This involved exploring to what extent friendships and other networks develop within and across ethnic groups as opposed to groups based on age, academic or leisure/sporting interests; the extent to which, if at all, racism structured the formation and development of these friendships; and identifying the structural, political, ideological and cultural factors under which it did so.

Second, we explored the ways in which minority pupils themselves conceptualised racist harassment, the extent to which this definition varied across minority pupils and was dependent on amongst other things, the influence of recent individual or familial experiences of racist harassment, the nature of inter-ethnic friendships at school and
national and local events relating to racism. Third and relatedly, a detailed investigation of minority pupils’ experience of racist harassment was undertaken to see if the character of racist harassment was affected by institutional (differing power relationships between perpetrator and ‘victim’) circumstances, in particular, whether the perpetrator happened to be a teacher or a pupil.

A fourth objective was to explore the ways in which minority pupils responded to or resisted the racist harassment they were subjected to in school. We aimed to uncover the extent to which the experience of racist harassment had led to a form of reactive minority ethnic assertiveness amongst minority pupils as witnessed in British society more widely in recent years (Modood 1992; Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992) and/or to what extent South Asian academic success can be seen as a conscious strategy to curb or at least negotiate the impact of racist harassment in school (Mac an Ghaill 1988; Gillborn 1993).

The final objective was to contribute to the development of a methodology suitable for a study of racialisation in school. Whilst problems were encountered with the initial design of the study, the revised research design, and in particular the use of group discussions organised around friendship groups facilitated the collection of a rich data set on the salience of racism in secondary school life in the late 1990s (see methods section for further details).

Methods

The research team was faced with a number of challenging methodological problems when undertaking this research. This part of the report outlines in detail the manner in which they were resolved. The first question of design principle the research team was faced with was securing access to an appropriate school. In the original research design, it was envisaged that the work would be carried out in one secondary school in the Greater London area. To ensure the work could get underway promptly, preliminary contact was made with two schools that met the research specification from which one would be eventually chosen. These included a school in north London and a school in west London. Whilst access was not formally secured at this stage,
both schools welcomed the proposed research and offered to participate if research funding was secured.

Once the grant award was made, initial visits with both schools were arranged to enable the research team to decide which of the two schools would be most suitable for the proposed research. However, it quickly became clear that the attitudes of senior staff towards the proposed research had altered in the intervening six months or so. Whilst access was not denied, both schools insisted on certain restrictions being imposed such as the head choosing the participants to be interviewed that would have unnecessarily compromised the objectives of the research. More generally, there appeared to be a greater sense of caution and nervousness about the prospective research. Whilst the reasons for this volte-face were not made formally explicit to the research team, informal conversations with ‘friendly’ teachers did reveal that the evidence emerging from high-profile events like the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry had made some senior staff decidedly nervous about allowing a research team to carry out a study looking at social interaction between different social groups.

Consequently, the research team was forced to consider alternative sites upon which to carry out the research. Eventually, a school in north Kent was chosen. Whilst not located in the Greater London area, the school fulfilled the theoretically-informed criteria needed to meet the objectives of the study including most importantly, having high numbers of minority children. Although most of the minority pupils were of Indian Sikh descent, there were smaller numbers of pupils of Pakistani Muslim, Caribbean, Vietnamese and east European descent; the latter being refugees escaping the events going on in the former state of Yugoslavia.

Once access to the school was secured, the next question of design principle the research team were faced with was deciding whom to interview. Since we were keen to explore to what extent, if any, ‘inter-ethnic’ relations differed across different year groups, it was decided that in-depth interviews and observational work would be undertaken in two year groups: 11-12 year olds and 14-15 year olds.

The principal applicant (Virdee) was then introduced to the relevant classes and provided a broad outline of the study taking care to avoid any reference to ‘race’.
Initially, it was envisaged that the central focus of the research would be the in-depth interviews carried out with individual pupils. However, it quickly emerged that some of the pupils were not as willing to speak on a one-to-one basis as they were when they were with their friends. The reasons for this were two-fold. First, some of those interviewed in the younger year-group were extremely shy and proved unwilling to reveal a great deal about their school lives. Second, one or two were highly reluctant to discuss matters such as bullying for fear that the problem may become worse.

After discussions with the teaching staff, an alternative strategy was employed where interviews would be conducted with pupils who had organised themselves into friendship groups of three. This proved to be a highly successful strategy that ensured the data collected was of a high quality. The pupils proved more willing to discuss the nature of their lives in school and outside, and matters relating to racism were often spontaneously raised by the subjects themselves. However, one difficulty that arose was ensuring that data on the key aspects of the study were collected from all the pupils. This proved to be occasionally difficult with some of the quieter pupils unwilling to participate as actively in the group discussions as some of the other pupils. However, the problem was overcome to a large extent by the interviewer directing questions at these pupils and successfully eliciting answers from them.

Using a semi-structured interview guide, a total of 18 ‘friendship-based’ group discussions involving a total of 54 students were carried out in the autumn term of 1998. Nine of these group discussions were held with pupils selected from a class of 11-12 year olds and the remaining nine were carried out with pupils selected from a class of 14-15 year olds. Of those interviewed in the class of 11-12 year olds, six were of minority origin, whilst in the class of 14-15 year olds, eight were of minority origin. Allowing the students to choose the friendship-based groups was illuminating in itself in that it revealed the relatively racialised nature of social relations at school. Overall, whilst the younger pupils tended to organise themselves in ethnically-mixed groupings, the older pupils did so in only a single case. The group discussions lasted between thirty and forty-five minutes and covered a broad range of themes including:
• The pupils' biography
• Relations with pupils in classroom/ playground/ sports/ going to and from school
• Relations with teachers
• Bullying
• Racism
• Identity

All the group discussions were tape-recorded and transcribed. The group discussions were supplemented by observational work in particular classes, the playground, the common room, corridors and dinner hall. This aspect of the research design was highly significant in helping the researcher to establish trust with the pupils and understand the salience of racism in the lives of minority pupils. Since the remit of this study was not only to assess the nature and impact of racist harassment by fellow pupils but also teachers, a total of ten in-depth interviews were carried out with ‘white’ members of staff. These interviews lasted between forty-five and sixty minutes.

The research team were acutely aware of the possible dangers of drawing inferences from data generated from a single source. The primary way in which such ‘distortions’ were detected and corrected was by employing a form of triangulation (Stake 1995) to establish whether the data collected from the different research methods (e.g. group discussions, observational work and interviews with teachers) corroborated one another.

The data collected were analysed by adapting the framework approach employed by Ritchie and Spencer (1994). This is an analytical process which, though systematic and disciplined, relies on the creative and conceptual ability of the analyst to determine meaning, salience and connections with the data. A system of grids based around key themes arising out of a critical reading of existing work were developed to form a preliminary template with which to analyse the data collected. A form of preliminary coding was carried out where the data were entered on to these grids. From this, the themes and issues that arose from the existing work and which formed
the basis of the initial grids were revised and re-configured so that the thematic framework that the research team began with was revised in the light of the data collected.

Results

_The significance of racism in structuring social relations in school_

The study found that racism played a greater part in structuring the lives of older minority pupils in school than younger ones. On the whole, the observational work carried out in classrooms, corridors, the playground and whilst the pupils played sports revealed that younger white pupils rarely drew on racist discourses whilst interacting with minority pupils. Within the context of a broader discussion of bullying, some revealing insights about young white pupils’ attitudes towards racism were gathered which perhaps offer an explanation for its relative absence in school.

Adam: I’ve seen people get bullied…my friend Amarjit gets called racist names when we’re walking to school. It upsets him…It’s rubbish. We’re all equal. I don’t know why people say these things.

This extract reveals that at least part of the explanation for its relative absence in school was that many white pupils believed it to be morally abhorrent. However, discussions with other young white pupils highlighted not only the presence of an embedded racism but also perhaps the reasons why they did not draw on it in school.

Jamie: I don’t like Pakis…they smell. If we call them names we get told off by the school.

Hence, equally important in understanding the relative absence of racism in the lives of younger minority pupils’ lives was the school’s condemnation of racism which had the effect of deterring some pupils from drawing on it for fear of the consequences.
Whilst there was a relative absence of racism in school, many of the younger minority pupils reported being subjected to racism whilst journeying to and from school. The following incident was indicative of the racism they faced.

Gurjeet: I was walking past a pub when these four white guys shout out ‘Go back home to where you came from’. I was close to where I lived so I pointed to my home and said that’s where I was going (He laughs).

This incident usefully highlights the manner in which constructions of nation are intimately entwined with a sense of whiteness thereby automatically signifying all those with a brown or black skin colour as foreign and therefore unwelcome (Gilroy 1987; Back 1991; 1996; Solomos and Back 1995).

The experience of the older minority pupils contrasted sharply to that of younger minority pupils. In many ways, racism represented the defining issue in many of these pupils’ lives. All those interviewed reported being subjected to some form of racist harassment in school ranging from occasional physical attacks to regular verbal abuse. A detailed investigation of the incidents reported and observed revealed that racism was articulated under very particular circumstances. First, some older white pupils drew on racist discourses only in situations where an authority figure such as a teacher was absent thereby reducing their chances of being reprimanded. The recounting of the following incident represents a particularly shocking example of the way in which racist discourses were accompanied by violence.

Gurdip: They picked on you once didn’t they?
Sarbjit: It was a games lesson but sir was still in the changing room. A gang of white boys in my class knocked my turban off with a cricket bat and kept shouting ‘we hate fucking top-knots’.

Second, racist discourses tended to be employed during periods where pupils were engaged in some form of competitive activity. The group discussions and observational work revealed that if pupils of South Asian descent were good at sport, were dating white girls or showed an aptitude in class work, some of the white boys would deliberately engage in a campaign of concerted abuse as a means by which to
‘put them in their place’. According to this world view, whites and Asians comprised discrete ‘races’ with white people having a higher status in society than non-whites. By ‘acquiring’ certain attributes like those discussed above, some white pupils perceived these particular Asians as attempting to challenge the status quo that they benefited from. This point is neatly illustrated in the following extract where a pupil of South Asian descent recalls the racist reaction of some white pupils when he was selected to play for the school football team.

Gurdip: I’m good at sport right. I was the only Asian selected to play for the school. I knew the other boys on the team… I thought they were my friends. But they never passed the ball to me, kept calling me ‘paki’ and then blamed me for losing the game. Once when we were in the mini-bus, one of them said, ‘Pakis don’t play sport… fuck off’.

Significantly, the deployment of such racist discourses was muted in the context of the classroom because of the presence of an authority figure – the teacher. However, there was little doubt that racism continued to structure social relations. In particular, this was most visibly evidenced with pupils of different ethnic groups sitting separately. When one of the students was asked to comment on this observation, he replied simply that:

We don’t get on with each other. They don’t like us… we don’t like them (Gurdip).

The development of this process of balkanisation will be discussed further in the context of the ways in which minority pupils attempt to negotiate the impact of racist discourses in school. However, we now want to briefly report on social relations between other minority groups and white pupils in school. The group discussions revealed that pupils of Caribbean, Vietnamese and east European descent were not negatively signified in the dominant racist discourse that prevailed in school. Whilst the observational work suggested that the small number of pupils of Caribbean, Vietnamese and east European descent normally socialised with white pupils, there also appeared to be little antipathy between them and pupils of South Asian descent.
‘Victim’ Conceptions of Racist Harassment

Over the past decade or so there has been a heated discussion amongst academics about what types of behaviour constitute racist harassment (see Virdee 1995 for an overview). However, this discussion has taken place without reference to the ways in which the minority communities themselves actually conceive of the problem. The present study found that minority pupils held widely differing understandings of racist harassment. On the one hand, there were some that believed it constituted physical attacks and property damage whereas on the other hand, there were others that believed it comprised a wider range of behaviours including physical attacks to being deliberately ignored and excluded from particular social activities.

On the whole, those minority pupils that had forged strong friendships with pupils of the same ethnic group tended to employ the wider definition of racist harassment whereas those minority pupils with friends from different ethnic groups tended to employ the narrower definition of racist harassment. Part of the explanation for this difference was the attempts by a small number of minority pupils who had forged friendships with white pupils to accommodate themselves to the racist sentiment of their white friends. Distancing themselves from minority pupils that ‘always go on about racism’ was one means by which they ensured that they would not be subjected to racist harassment themselves. As the following extract revealed, for one South Asian pupil who employed the narrower definition of racist harassment, this meant accepting a deferential position towards his white friends.

Harpreet: In my class, when some of the Asian boys go on about racism, the white kids shout back ‘go home to your own country then’. So I try not to say anything when they call people names. They say I’m ok because I’m not like the others…always complaining.

Other factors that influenced conceptions of racist harassment included whether minority pupils or their families had been subjected to racist harassment, coverage of the problem in the local and national media and who the perpetrator was. These findings have important policy implications and lead us to question whether survey research such as the British Crime Survey (BCS) carried out by the Home Office can ever accurately capture the extent of racist harassment faced by minority groups.
The balkanisation of school life: resisting the processes of racialisation and racism

We found that minority pupils employed a range of strategies to negotiate racism in school. The dominant strategy employed was that of ‘racial formation’ (Omi and Winant 1986; Gilroy 1987) constructed around the identity of ‘Asian’. The following extract reveals the manner in which this identity came to be constructed in school.

Haroon: The white boys don’t like us. Everyone with a brown skin is lumped together as a ‘Paki’. We’re never going to be accepted.
Interviewer: What do you mean?
Haroon: If we try to play football with the whites in the playground or for the school team they don’t like it…they call us names and tell us to piss off. So we have our own Asian teams in the playground and we play for Asian teams in the [local] football league.

The processes of racialisation and racism were decisive factors in encouraging many minority pupils to appropriate the ascribed racial identity of ‘Paki’ and using it to forge an imagined community of ‘Asians’. Importantly, rather than competing with white pupils for places on the school football team and risk being subjected to racism, many of the Asian boys chose to withdraw from these competitive arenas and create their own ‘racially-specific’ spaces free from the risk of racist harassment where they organised football matches for ‘Asians only’. However, this development had its own consequences in so far as it reinforced the racist impression held by many of the white pupils that ‘Asians always stick together’. Hence, whilst this development tended to reduce the number of potentially racist interactions between white and Asian pupils, it did little to undermine the racist images that the former had of Asians.

Interestingly, this process of ‘racial formation’ was sufficiently fluid to accommodate people of Caribbean and Vietnamese descent, especially when it entailed the combating of racism as the following extract reveals.

Interviewer: How do you get on with Caribbean and Vietnamese pupils?
Surinder: I don’t have any problem with them. Isaac [a Caribbean pupil] is in my class and I like him a lot. They tend to stick with the whites. But if they
find that someone has been racist to us and there’s going to be a big fight between Asians and whites, they always come over to our side.

This process of balkanisation was further evidenced in other parts of school life such as in the classroom where on the whole, pupils of the same ethnic origin sat together. Of course, a minority of Asian and white pupils did interact with each other without evidence of racism structuring these relationships. However, they remained a clear minority.

Taken together, the evidence presented in this report strongly suggests that racist harassment continues to structure the lives of minority pupils and has contributed to a growing balkanisation of school life.

**Outputs**

Three articles arising out of the research are currently in preparation and will be submitted to refereed sociology journals by summer 2000. These are:

1. The social basis of racism in school;
2. The balkanisation of school life: resisting the processes of racialisation and racism;
3. Towards a materialist theory of racism.

The principal applicant has also taken part in several discussions on radio stations in Scotland and England discussing the racialisation of school life. Additionally, in autumn 2000, a seminar is planned to enable a small number of academics and policy makers in Scotland and England to discuss the implications of the research.
Impacts

It is expected that the impact of the study will be significant with interest from the media, including the ethnic minority press, the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) and those who have a professional interest in these matters.

Research Priorities

The findings arising from this study would be usefully complemented by work that considered the extent to which the racialisation of school life is gendered.

References


