
Playgrounds, the Press and Preventing Racism: a case study

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ABSTRACT This article begins by recalling a recent court case about bullying in a school playground and about how the case was trivialised in certain sections of the media, with much discourse of 'political correctness gone mad', and so forth, and of the need for good old-fashioned 'common sense'. Leaders of teachers' unions took a different view, rightly, but were denounced as 'hags and thought police'. The article then recalls the history of the term 'political correctness' and outlines the approaches to racist bullying that are presented at length in recently published DfES advice, and that are very different from the crude simplicities of typical media coverage.

'Unkind Names'

'Anybody who was ever called unkind names at school must be gasping with astonishment this weekend,' said an editorial in *The Daily Telegraph* in April 2006, 'at the news that the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) has thought fit to bring criminal charges against a 10-year-old who is said to have called an 11-year-old schoolmate a 'Paki' and 'Bin Laden' in the playground.' It continued:

Every word uttered by Jonathan Finestein, the District Court Judge who is hearing the case at Salford Youth Court, rang with common sense. The decision to prosecute, he said, was 'crazy'. It was 'political correctness gone mad' (there are times when only a cliché will do to describe the sheer crassness of modern British bureaucracy).

'I was repeatedly called fat at school,' said the judge. 'Does this amount to a criminal offence?... Nobody is more against racist abuse than me, but these are boys in a playground, this is nonsense... There must be other ways of dealing with this apart from criminal prosecution. In the old days, the headmaster would have got them both and given them a good clouting.' The judge had other home truths to tell, which ought to give the Greater Manchester Police

and the CPS pause for thought. 'This is how stupid the whole system is getting,' he said. 'There are major crimes out there and the police don't bother to prosecute. If you get your car stolen, it doesn't matter, but you get two kids falling out ... this is nonsense.'

'Two kids falling out' – that was how the case was presented in the media. It was a mere 'playground spat', they said. What actually happened was that three white boys repeatedly harassed and persecuted a boy of mixed heritage over a period of six months or more, calling him Paki, Bin Laden and Nigger. His parents complained to the school but the abuse continued. Eventually, when the verbal abuse was accompanied by a physical attack, and the boy was injured, they went to the police. The police for their part successfully used restorative justice approaches with two of the alleged culprits, who apologised and accepted formal reprimands. The parents of the third, however, refused to let him apologise and the CPS reluctantly took the case to court.

During the four weeks immediately before the court hearing at which Mr Finestein made the remarks quoted above the DfES had organised 18 conferences around the country – two in each of England's nine regions – to introduce and disseminate web-based guidance it had prepared on dealing with racist bullying in schools. This article outlines some of the principal points in the advice, particularly those which might possibly have caused Mr Finestein pause for thought before he made his pronouncement. But first, it is relevant to mention some of the other press coverage about the episode.

'A Playground Quarrel'

Editorial comment in the *Daily Mail* echoed the *Telegraph* in stressing that racist name-calling in school playgrounds is basically of trivial importance, merely 'a playground quarrel'.

It happens all the time. Schoolchildren squabble. There may be tears. They call each other utterly unacceptable names. Their teacher calls them over and tells them not to be so offensive and learn to respect each other.

So children learn to become responsible adults. Not this time. Now a playground quarrel engages the full majesty of the law, with a police investigation, a file prepared for the Crown Prosecution Service, an appearance in court. The judge is right. This is political correctness gone mad. How sad that a country once known for its common sense should come to such a sorry pass.

The same theme was captured in a headline in *The Sunday Times*: 'Up on a charge of being a typical child'. It is typical of children to abuse each other, the headline seemed to assume, but also they typically grow out of it. In the article beneath this headline Minette Marin maintained that 'the whole thing would

have blown over long ago had not the forces of political correctness overcome common sense.' Whereas Finstein had recommended a clip round the ear as a good way of educating children to be non-violent, Marin's solution seemed even more drastic:

When I was about nine, I had my mouth washed out with soap and water – a surprisingly nasty ordeal – by the headmistress for insulting another girl unforgivably, even though she had insulted me first, almost as nastily. Despite its injustice, it was a good lesson.

Marin's targets included 'the regulations and culture of anti-racism', as also 'anti-racism guidelines'. Both in guidelines and in regulations she detected Stalinism and witch hunts, and closed possible discussion by contending that the people and policies she disagrees with are, simply, insane:

Racism is, of course, a real evil but the current guilt-ridden obsession with it, so clearly expressed in this case, only serves to inflame it and actually to further the cause of racist politics – the reverse of what the politically correct protagonists intended. This entire episode has a faint whiff of the Soviet show trials or the Salem witch-hunts about it, a kind of public hysteria. Whom the gods wish to destroy, they first make mad.

Spokespersons for the NUT and the NASUWT, to their credit, were fearless in their criticism of the judge. This brought upon them, though, extraordinary personal abuse from sections of the media. Of one union spokesperson it was suggested that she was a blinkered workaholic and that her comments reflected the 'bovine, brainwashed politically-correct mindset of the liberal establishment'. There was reference also to her 'politically correct world of inverted values'.

'It can't be long,' said A.N. Wilson in the *Telegraph*, introducing crude sexist abuse into his argument, 'before the hags and thought-police of the teachers' unions try to outlaw the use of nicknames altogether.' 'If this kind of sanctimonious silliness exists at the top of the teachers' unions what hope is there for education in this country?' asked Minette Marin. 'How typical of the teaching unions, in their crazed desire to stalinise our children rather than educate them,' commented Simon Heffer in the *Telegraph*. He continued with ponderous sarcasm:

Since neither the CPS nor the police have anything better to do, perhaps I could suggest an extension of this policy, starting with abandoning the minimum age of criminality. It is obvious that all primary schools and, indeed, nurseries should be regularly inspected for signs of racist tots, with exemplary prosecutions where necessary. And don't forget maternity wards – you can't catch them too young, and heaven knows what harm is being done to our nation by bigoted babies.

Political Correctness

The media coverage outlined above was a salutary reminder of the climate of opinion in parts of society, and of the insecurities and anxieties by which many white people continue to be haunted. The DfES advice on dealing with racist bullying helps teachers to engage firmly, confidently and respectfully with such anxieties, and to allay them. Before it is outlined briefly here, there is a recollection of the term that Finestein and his supporters repeatedly used as a particularly virulent form of abuse, 'political correctness'.

A typical dictionary definition (Research Machines website, 2005), says that political correctness is: 'a shorthand term for a set of liberal attitudes about education and society, and the terminology associated with them. To be politically correct is to be sensitive to unconscious racism and sexism and to display environmental awareness.' Such definitions are helpful but arguably disingenuous, for they do not evoke the history of the term, nor the way it has been customarily used at least since the late 1980s. A historical account would recall that the term was first used ironically and self-mockingly, though with a serious intent. Feminists in the United States in the 1960s sought to challenge words and phrases which they saw as reflecting and reinforcing harmful stereotypes about conventional gender roles, but to do so without losing a sense of humour and proportion.

The term was used also by campaigners against the apartheid regime in South Africa, making ethical choices about the wines and fruit they bought, and then subsequently in relation to environmental awareness. They too used the term humorously, not as a label or banner to summarise their politics. 'We only stock those products,' said a shopkeeper in a *Punch* cartoon in the 1970s, 'that haven't been tested on live animals, don't exploit the Third World, and of which the advertising doesn't degrade women, men, children, or the dignity of the class struggle.' A placard behind the shopkeeper indicated that the only items for sale were 'Hand-woven bee-keeping veils'.

The term was then adopted, similarly with irony and a measure of self-criticism, and similarly in the United States before moving to other English-speaking countries, by people working in the fields of race relations and disability rights and awareness. It never became widespread as a self-description, however, and was in due course dropped by those who used it ironically. Towards the end of the 1980s the term was seized on by people opposed to the agendas of those who had first used it. They saw it as a shorthand term to evoke a cluster of ideas that they heartily disliked. It then rapidly gained its current usage as a term of derision or abuse. It is now used almost entirely with pejorative undertones (i.e. never neutrally, as in the dictionary definition cited above), and in appearance or intention it is frequently combined with hostility or suspicion towards anti-discrimination policies and legislation, and projects to promote and increase cultural sensitivity.

Similarities and Differences

The DfES advice on dealing with racist bullying schools is explicitly aware of the anxieties and insecurities which find expression in discourse of political correctness. It is in this connection that it discusses at length the similarities and differences between racist bullying and other forms of bullying. The principal similarities, it observes, are that pupils who are targeted experience great distress. They may become fearful, depressed and lacking in self-confidence, and their progress at school may be severely damaged. The distress is connected with feelings of being excluded and rejected. Also, the distress is because a characteristic is picked out as a justification for the bullying that the person attacked can do nothing about – their size, whether they wear glasses, the colour of their hair, the colour of their skin, their religious or cultural background. Since all kinds of bullying cause distress, all are wrong.

Further, those who engage in bullying develop a false pride in their own superiority. Teachers and even parents are sometimes not aware of the miseries that are being inflicted, or of the cruelty that is being perpetrated. An additional similarity is that when dealing with incidents, staff must attend to (a) the needs, feelings and wishes of pupils at the receiving end (b) the needs, feelings and wishes of their parents and carers (c) the children and young people principally responsible for the bullying (d) any supporters they have and (e) any bystanders and witnesses.

The difference, the DfES advice continues, is that racism has a long history affecting millions of people and is a common feature in wider society. People are seriously harmed and injured by it, and sometimes even viciously attacked and murdered. Words such Spotty, Fatty and Four Eyes are seldom used by adults and seldom or never used by adults to justify offensive behaviour. Racist words and prejudices, however, are associated with discrimination in employment and the provision of services, and with a range of criminal offences. The distinctive feature of a racist attack or insult is that a person is attacked or insulted not as an individual, as in most other offences, but as the representative of a family, community or group. Other members of the same group, family or community are in consequence made to feel threatened and intimidated as well. So it is not just the pupil who is attacked who feels unwelcome or marginalised. 'When they call me a Paki,' a nine-year-old child is quoted, 'it's not just me they're hurting. It's all my family and all other black people too.'

A message in all bullying is 'you don't belong'. In the case of racist bullying the message is not only 'you don't belong in this playground or this friendship group' but also 'you don't belong in this country'; it is therefore often even more devastating and traumatic, for the pupil who is attacked, than other forms of bullying. A further point is that racist attacks are committed not only against a community but also, in the eyes of offenders themselves, on behalf of a community – they see themselves as representative of, and supported in their behaviour by, their friends, family and peer group, and they may well feel it is right and proper to take the law into their own hands.

The DfES advice explains and illustrates these points with a wealth of detail. It draws on, and is inspired and nurtured and emboldened by, the voices, stories, memories, sufferings and experiences of children and young people still at school, and by their resolution, resilience and sense of personal and collective responsibility. Titles of the website's introductory material, drawn from writings and comments by young people, include:

They used to call me names ... I never had the chance to explain ...
Listen to us, we are the experts ... How it feels to be a Traveller ...
What really hurt me ... What was there to say? ... I refuse to be a
victim ... I just want to say thank you.

The website is introduced not only by the voices of children and young people but also by a message from the minister for schools, commending the website to all teachers, and by brief reminders of law and statute. These include reference to school self-evaluation, and to the *Every Child Matters* requirements. Since the advice is solidly backed by ministerial approval, and solidly based in law and statute, schools and local authorities would be wise, to put it mildly, to take account of it. Preventing and addressing racism is not an optional extra, something to see to if and when more fundamental things are in place. On the contrary, it is central and foundational in the educational enterprise.

Another key feature of the advice is that it develops and expands the Lawrence Inquiry discourse of racist incidents and conceptualises the problem we're faced with as bullying, essentially – something to be tackled within the framework of a school's behaviour and anti-bullying policies. This aspect of the advice has encountered a certain degree of resistance both in the antiracist community and in the anti-bullying community, for in both places it seems to water down their concerns. Those who produced the advice, however, remain confident that so-called racist incidents in schools should be seen as instances of bullying. That said, whilst all instances of racist bullying are racist incidents, in the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry definition, and should be recorded and reported accordingly, not all racist incidents involve bullying. The operational definition proposed by the DfES, hammered out and refined over several months of reflection and consultation, is as follows:

The term racist bullying refers to a range of hurtful behaviour, both physical and psychological, that makes a person feel unwelcome, marginalised, excluded, powerless or worthless because of their colour, ethnicity, culture, faith community, national origin or national status.

The advice provides guidance on supporting learners in schools who are at the receiving end of racisms, and guidance on challenging those who are responsible. The latter is based on a typology developed by Home Office researchers in the 1990s. You can (a) ignore (b) rebuke (c) use logical arguments against or (d) adopt a holistic approach to, incidents of racist bullying. The dangers of ignoring are obvious. Those of rebuking are that it may cause

bitterness and a resolve, next time, not to be found out. The dangers of logical arguments are that, though they may hone the debating skills of teachers, they may feed a sense of inferiority and may act then as recruiting sergeants for the far right. Equally seriously, they may breed enthusiasm for the kinds of voice quoted at the start of this article, those that claim that the sources of society's ills are multiculturalism and political correctness.

A holistic approach involves seeing and dealing with racist bullying within a social context that involves bystanders and reinforcers as well as ringleaders, and – of course – putting one's primary energy into being proactive and preventative. It's much easier to respond effectively when something happens if one has first thought through how to prevent it.

Responsibility

At one of the consultative conferences that prepared the advice a speaker commented on the distinctive aspects that training in the antiracism field needs to have. 'Typically,' she said, 'we think about training in terms of skills, knowledge and understanding. But whenever there's training which involves the element of race, it has to be more than that. It has to engage hearts and minds, it has to force us to contemplate our humanity. It's got to be more than facts, figures, skills and pedagogy, it's actually got to make us think about love and care and concern and kindness.' She continued: 'We have to acknowledge the guilt that some of our white colleagues feel and the resentment and anger of some of our black colleagues and we've got to come to a position collectively, where we agree that guilt and blame have no place at the dining table of shared responsibility.' Such words strengthen resolve to strive for a better society, in school playgrounds as well as everywhere else, and to withstand and face down the cruel simplicities of the right-wing media.

Note

Robin Richardson acted as external consultant for the DfES advice. He writes here in a personal capacity, not as a representative of the DfES. The advice is at www.teachernet.gov.uk/racistbullying

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