



6 : CULTURAL ISSUES

What do we mean by cultural issues?

When embarking on any consideration of cultural issues in your school, first ensure that colleagues are agreed on what is meant.

INTRODUCTION

The term cultural issues here refers to the educational (and indeed lifelong) implications of individual pupils' belonging to, or being perceived as belonging to:

- particular ethnic groups, i.e. groups which share some cultural features, e.g. language, religion, history, customs, food, clothing preferences, etc. – in this context, usually groups other than the 'traditional' Caucasian-British group;
- groups with particular value systems, systems of religious belief and/or systems of socialising children within the family, i.e. groups (which may or may not share some of the other cultural features listed above) which draw a sense of communal identity from their faith or practices, e.g. Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims or Plymouth Brethren – in this context, groups that reflect an ethos other than the predominant value system and religious ethos of your school;
- and/or families whose adult members could be said to fit certain working/non-working or economic or occupational groups, sometimes called 'classes', e.g. professional and managerial, skilled manual or those unable (for whatever reason) to work.

Care should be taken with use of some terms. 'Race' is a crude and unhelpful concept; it implies (superficial) distinctions on the basis of physical characteristics alone and seems to suggest that 'pure' racial genealogies are commonplace (which they are not).

'Minority' may also be, strictly speaking, inaccurate if, in school, particular ethnic, social or other groups predominate numerically, even though a different school ethos (e.g. 'traditional middle-class', Caucasian-British, English-speaking) none the less prevails. The whole concept of 'ethnicity', too, should be treated with care. Sometimes it may be

appropriate to talk of Asians as an ‘ethnic group’; more often it may be advisable to identify specific ethnic sub-groups, e.g. Panjabi and Gujerati speakers (distinguished by language), or Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus (distinguished by religion, customs etc.).

‘Cultural issues’ therefore applies here to areas of concern that are caused, at least in part, by differences between one or more of the types of grouping listed above. Schools may need to address disadvantages to individuals and groups caused by:

- racism and ethnic stereotyping from teachers and other adults in school;
- conflicts and tensions amongst ethnic peer groups and subcultures;
- racism and ethnic stereotyping by other pupils;
- prejudice or bias against certain value systems or beliefs at institutional level, in the curriculum or in individual teachers;
- prejudice or bias against certain value systems or beliefs in other pupils;
- cultural ‘messages’ about hierarchy and inequality perpetuated by your school;
- ‘economic disadvantage’ in the home background of pupils;
- and/or stereotyping on a ‘class’ or economic basis by teachers or pupils.

WHY ARE CULTURAL ISSUES AN IMPORTANT FOCUS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE EDUCATION OF GIFTED AND TALENTED PUPILS?

- The characteristics that are perceived as denoting ability, including high ability, vary between cultural groups, e.g. in some groups morality, conscientiousness or interpersonal skills may be more highly esteemed than the cognitive ability so highly prized in white, ‘middle-class’, British culture. One consequence is that high ability may easily go unrecognised in pupils from some cultural groups. Some groups may also hold strong views on what are appropriate methods of provision for highly able pupils. Groups may vary in the aspirations they have for their children and in their perceptions of ‘high achievement’ (these aspirations may be distinct between the genders, too). Schools need to be aware of such potential differences. Then they can strive for systems of identification of, provision for and assessment of the highly able that are as sensitively designed and inclusive as possible.
- All cultural groups at all strata of school life – management, staff and pupils – tend to have preconceptions about the abilities of their own and other cultural groups. These can create barriers that disadvantage those capable of high achievement. For example, pupils can be grouped unfairly on the basis of cultural stereotypes (e.g. too many ‘economically disadvantaged’ children in lower sets), or peer-group pressure on a cultural group can be exerted in subtle ways (e.g. African Caribbean peers can be made to feel low achievement is expected of them, so why bother?). If we are to equate high ability with the fulfilment of potential, such barriers need to be investigated.
- Where there are tensions between the value systems and practices of certain cultural groups and those of your school, more able pupils may also encounter barriers. For example, pupils who do not have access to TV and video at home for religious reasons may find themselves disadvantaged if required to undertake certain kinds of

homework, media studies work, etc.; in PE, RE and PSHE lessons, pupils may encounter conflicts with their beliefs and value systems which they are not encouraged, or do not feel able, to explore. Yet they may have 'ability' in these areas.

WHAT ARE THE KEY ISSUES TO CONSIDER?

- Pupils and their abilities and achievements can seldom be considered solely in terms of their cultural background. Other issues, such as **gender issues**, and factors such as location in the catchment area, age, motivation, and emotional or socialisation problems, are usually overlapping concerns, and are likely to need investigation too. If you are concerned with the **underachievement** of able pupils, nor should you examine cultural group *differences* alone. Several cultural groups may share the same, more generic, problems, e.g. a lack of recognition in school of their proficiency in languages other than English, and the usefulness of these skills in English and modern language lessons; or a lack of recognition of their own value systems in the PSHE syllabus.
- Beware of generalisations, e.g. that ethnic groups are disadvantaged across the board in our schools, or that Asians tend to do well in school while African Caribbeans tend to do badly, both in comparison with each other and with white pupils (a generalisation given further credence by the Swann Report of 1985 into the educational achievements of ethnic minority groups). The makeup and cultural background of many ethnic groups are very different today from what they were, even in the 1980s; and such broad labels as 'Asians' and 'African Caribbeans' cover many different groups. Gillborn and Gipps showed that by 1996, levels of attainment among ethnic groups had improved in many parts of the country, with dramatic increases in the examination performance of some. Amongst African Caribbeans, it was boys, especially, who had not followed this trend. Gillborn and Gipps also highlighted the sharp rise in numbers of school exclusions amongst some ethnic groups, and unequal opportunities for university places. Other factors however, such as gender, occupations of adults in households, etc., might well complicate this picture. However, Gaine and George (1999) do confirm that, at least in some LEAs, groups of African Caribbean boys are indeed underachieving, and that their results may even be falling, while there is some (uneven) evidence of underachievement by Bangladeshis, too, compared with white peers. If similar patterns do exist in your school, contributory factors may include:
 - Pupil responses to teacher expectations of some ethnic groups. Gaine and George (1999) outline much research showing stereotypical teacher assumptions, e.g. about the intelligence of African Caribbean pupils (low) and Asian pupils (high), and similarly sweeping generalisations about their potential threats to discipline. These were further overlaid with preconceptions about gender, etc. Such teacher attitudes may be reflected in their assessments, the ways in which they group pupils and many other aspects of their role.
 - The formation of pupil subcultures and peer groupings along ethnic lines (often along gender lines as well), at least partly in response to teacher attitudes. Such groups can

become hostile and disruptive, though some can accommodate themselves to a school's value system and even find ways of achieving academic success.

- Pupils' own racism and ethnic stereotyping of their peers, e.g. name-calling, and manifest expectations that certain cultural groups will perform or behave in certain ways.
- GCSE passes at ordinary and advanced level are highly correlated with parental occupation, and the sons and daughters of professionals are over ten times more likely to proceed to higher education than those of unskilled manual workers (Gaine and George, 1999). Again, beware of applying these patterns to your school without investigation. However, if similar trends exist, contributory factors may include:
 - Values at home, e.g. some homes may aspire to the economic freedom of working at as young an age as possible while others may promote sustained application to achieve working goals further into the future; some may have different ambitions for boys and for girls.
 - The existence or lack of supportive parental skills, e.g. reading, or computer literacy.
 - Economic and material differences at home, e.g. differences in diet, or the presence or absence of space in which to do homework, useful resources such as reference books, etc., or the fact that pupils may have part-time jobs out of school.
 - The extent to which home language, and codes of language use, differ from language use at school, e.g. dialect, or another language.
 - The existence of institutional structures in school alien to, or in conflict with, pupils' cultural values, or which seem to reflect a 'poor best' that some pupils should expect, e.g. hierarchical staffing structures, or systems of **pupil grouping** which may suggest inequalities in 'worth' between pupils.
 - Pupil responses to subconscious teacher expectations of some 'class' groups, e.g. the knowledge that children from non-professional families are less likely to go on to higher education, or that some pupils will be 'economically disadvantaged' when doing homework, may communicate itself to pupils and become self-fulfilling.

WHAT MIGHT WE DO IN SCHOOL?

- At whole school level, you could analyse the achievements of different cultural groups:
 - Compare numbers being identified as highly able across the school.
 - Compare numbers being identified as highly able in individual subjects, and/or aspects of subjects.
 - Compare numbers achieving at different levels and/or different grades etc. in individual subjects in KS3 tests, GCSE, A/AS level.
 - Track and compare rates of progress in different subjects at different ages.

- Identify underachieving pupils in different cohorts and subjects, and compare numbers.
- Compare all such data with data from local schools and your LEA.
- Interview and questionnaire pupils about their abilities, achievements and the factors they consider significant in influencing their successes or any problems.
- Analyse 'cultural groupings' to which staff belong at senior management level, within subject departments and amongst ancillary staff.

However, remember that members of any 'group' may have as many differences as they do similarities in terms of their achievements, needs and problems; also, that different 'groups' may have significant features in common.

Avoid snapshot data; build up a longitudinal picture.

➤ At whole school level, you could:

- Review procedures for identifying more able pupils. Should the highly able be identified, at least in part, in relation to *their* cultural values of ability? Ensure you include parental recommendations and judgements, and self-nomination. Examine their bilingual capability, where appropriate, as a useful indicator. Other useful indicators could be their ability to adapt to different settings rapidly, e.g. between home and school, breaktimes and class. Observe pupils' performance outside the 'normal' school environment (Passow, 1993).
- Discuss and publicise issues such as racism and cultural stereotyping, e.g. through school assemblies and school posters. Encourage whole-school promotion and debate of common values, e.g. equality of opportunity, the nature and diversity of high achievement.
- Review whole-school provision and pupil grouping policies where cultural issues may play a part, e.g. a preponderance of one cultural group in lower sets: is this justified or simply biased? Does it isolate or demotivate those groups? Or mixing boys and girls of similar ability: should such policies be explained and debated with parents?
- Consider the benefits of mentoring or counselling programmes for especially vulnerable cultural groups. This may be subject-specific or at the whole-school, pastoral level.
- If your school staffing does not reflect the cultural mix in school, what can be done to redress any imbalances, e.g. recruitment of voluntary help, use of mentors from appropriate cultural groups?

➤ At subject departmental, year group and/or classroom level you could:

- Identify and target groups of pupils who are underachieving, or in danger of underachieving, at least partly because of cultural factors, e.g. peer group or parental pressure, dangers of teacher stereotyping, or economic disadvantage.
- Review provision for these pupils, including the highly able, to ensure it:
 1. Is culturally pluralistic, and multicultural in focus.
 2. Is as bilingual (or multilingual) as possible, where pupils have other languages; celebrate and use pupils' skills in languages other than English.
 3. Extends teaching and learning beyond school into experience in pupils' own communities.
 4. Educates pupils to be more socially involved and active in their school and its community.
 5. Uses intensive, sympathetic one-to-one or small-group teaching in areas of difficulty.
 6. Provides extra resources where these are needed, e.g. funding or subsidy for **enrichment** activities; breakfast clubs; homework support groups; access to reference materials, computers etc. in school.
- Undertake some action research in classrooms to monitor the effects of any of the changes suggested above.

Do not take any action without considering related matters such as gender issues.

RECOMMENDED READING

Arroyo, C.G. and Sternberg, R.J., Against all odds: A view of the gifted disadvantaged. *In: Wallace, B. and Adams, H.B., ed., 1993. Worldwide Perspectives on the Gifted Disadvantaged.* Bicester: AB Academic Publishers.

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