

# UNDERSTANDING RACISM

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It feels uncomfortable to describe someone as fat. The word is so loaded, somehow implicitly implying personal blame to them whatever their circumstances. A recent incident, however, brought home to me the possibly even more serious implications of the word. On the street, walking behind a little 'fat' boy, my granddaughter, just four, suddenly announced 'I hate fat people'. She then refused to talk about it, covering her ears<sup>1</sup>. In a family where differences between people are discussed positively and openly this came as a shock. But 'fatism' (if that is what it might be called), like sexism, disableism, racism and all the other 'isms', lurks often unrecognised and unacknowledged until someone, like her, articulates its presence. The reaction of those around her probably explains her own counter reaction to theirs. It made me wonder what other issues like this, at present relatively hidden, may be coming over the horizon to disturb us.

But for these reflections I want to focus on racism because that is what my book *Young children and racial justice - taking action for racial equality in the early years - understanding the past, thinking about the present, planning for the future*, published by the National Children's Bureau, is about<sup>2</sup>.

Racism, in all its various guises exists nearly everywhere in British society. Except for those many black and other minority ethnic people who know it only too well, this is difficult for some people to accept, especially those who live in largely white or suburban areas, let alone understand and acknowledge a responsibility to counter it wherever possible<sup>3</sup>. Maybe it is seen only as being associated with violence, racist marches and overt racist organisations. And it would be very rare indeed for an early years worker to reflect such hostility by abusing a child or refusing them admission to a nursery because they are black or from a cultural background different from their own – racism is so often more subtle, more insidious than that. And there is a clear knowledge from legislation, from government requirements, from training/education<sup>4</sup> and from their usual concern for children that this would be wrong and unacceptable.

I have been thinking a lot about racism and racial equality, even more so since I finished my book. Perhaps this is because I have wondered how people may receive it and,

particularly, what people might make of it in rural villages where I have visited friends. Recent research about the rise in anti-semitism and Islamophobia reinforces the already well-documented evidence of racial discrimination, particularly institutional racism, in both the private and public sectors of our society. All this inevitably impinges on the early years – our specific concern.

What can we in the early years can do to counter the implications of racism for young children and those who work with and care for them? It seems to me that much of the work many people have been doing, while nearly always worthy and well-intentioned in itself, is missing a key link– that without an understanding and acceptance of the reality of racism and its many facets, trying to address racial equality in practical ways is rather like pushing a jelly uphill – it at least brings the subject on to the agenda but misses a crucial opportunity to be really effective.

I believe that understanding racism (exactly what it is and is not) and recognising its pervasive existence and how and why it arose has the potential for taking away many of the previous barriers to true racial equality – it is the first step towards it. In essence this reinforces the definition of inclusion defined by the national Early Childhood Forum in 2003.

*Inclusion is a process of identifying, understanding and breaking down barriers to participation and belonging.*

It also supports the suggested sixth outcome of Every Child Matters: *Being equal : feeling you belong*<sup>5</sup>.

Understanding racism removes the possible guilt about it, the apprehensions about discussing it with one another and the fear of being called a racist or using the ‘wrong’ terminology. It removes all the diversions, misinterpretations, omissions, inappropriate research, not ‘noticing’ cues that in any other circumstances would be staring them in the face, the ethnocentric policies, practices, procedures and advisory groups that prevent it being addressed and the lack of attention to legal requirements. This applies equally across government and its departments nationally and locally and all early years practice, policies, procedures, education and training.

It allows people to examine what they are doing in the context of it being everyone's responsibility, everyone's commitment to get rid of racism. It reveals that many people, both black and white, have often been brought up with the same distorted versions of history and that any assumptions we might make are often common to many of us.

However, racism cannot just be understood by a brief mention or discussion of it. It takes time, sensitivity and a non-threatening environment where open and honest discussions can take place within a no blame culture and where attitudes can be explored comfortably. Such opportunities are rare in the early years field. My book is an attempt to open up these issues.

However, the media reaction to its publication, not for the first time, shows the depth of antagonism to even raising such issues by distorting, ridiculing and belittling them out of context and indicates the implications of even suggesting that young children may be racially prejudiced<sup>6</sup>. By necessity, therefore, we need constantly to be on our guard for any potential 'attacks' on our integrity as workers in the field of young children.

In the book I have tried to demystify racism sensitively and in a non-threatening way by unpacking its various components and citing examples in the text and with case studies. In particular, I have tried to clarify what is meant by institutional racism, with examples of situations where it might be manifested. The book considers all aspects of early years practice and procedures, discrimination, prejudice, assumptions, stereotypes, how children may learn to be racially prejudiced, dealing with racist incidents, racial equality policies, legislation, monitoring by ethnicity, a critique of government action (or inaction) and a framework for addressing all these issues. It discusses specific issues such as working in largely white areas, skin colour differences, mixed race families, name-calling, training/education and discussions between colleagues.

Some of the fora for considering racism are in training/education (including discussions), thinking, groups working to counter racism and reading. Here I would like to focus on training/education, at all levels, both initially and in professional development. I have observed, have participated in and organised such training/education over many years. I have discussed it, spoken about it and written about it endlessly. I often experience great angst afterwards and beat myself up because I know, for whatever reason, that what I

have tried to say has not been understood and I get flak for it. No doubt others will recognise and be familiar with this syndrome!

But, although there have been huge improvements about racial equality issues in legislation, in specific required standards about anti-discriminatory practice and in documentation about good practice, including in the new *Early Years Foundation Stage* and its reference to 'unlearning', for example, by using Persona Dolls, we do not yet seem to have made commensurate inroads into the understanding, knowledge, awareness and commitment of many who both attend and 'benefit' from courses on it. Furthermore, there are many people, particularly in the private sector, for whom the issue is not on their radar.

However, there are some notable exceptions to this where on-going work, over a period of time, has taken place and where people have overcome any initial apprehensions and are able to embrace the issues and address racism. In the early eighties a multiethnic, multicultural group of around twenty people, organised by the Commission for Racial Equality, met monthly for one whole day for two years to discuss issues around racism and young children – a life-changing experience. More recently, one local authority, Oxfordshire, appointed a person specifically to work on early years equality issues. This led over time to an ongoing developmental process with progress in in-service training and a carefully devised course for workers – half a day for anyone in the authority on principles, attitudes and practice plus two days for equality coordinators in settings. One aspect of this was a group of committed people meeting informally in the evenings over a three-year period to exchange ideas about all equality issues – again a mutually beneficial experience. The organisation Early Years Equality has worked similarly with a few local authorities and others may be doing likewise. And an increasing number of people are talking with one another about their critical concerns, seeking solutions and developing new approaches to their training/education courses.

It is clear that opportunities to share and exchange ideas within an ethos of trust lead to open and honest discussions and make way for developing training/education courses that take racism seriously, free of many of the usual barriers to the understanding, knowledge and skills needed to be able to put racial equality into practice. Such opportunities should be a preliminary to any training on racial equality. Haki Kapasi and I have written about this in some detail<sup>7</sup>.

Such opportunities, rare though they are at present, could be the key to effective training/education. Although such activity is time and money intensive, it is likely to be cheaper in the longer term and certainly far more likely to break down often unconsciously held entrenched attitudes. Committed workers with understanding, knowledge and skills to work with children and their families could begin to break down centuries of racially prejudiced attitudes and behaviour being perpetuated from generation to generation.

One model course that has been tried and tested over ten years in England is *More is Caught Than Taught* (MCTT)<sup>8</sup>. The Federation of Childcare Centres (Alabama, USA), initially developed it. Its basis is the building of trust so that participants (staff and/or family members) can feel comfortable in exploring issues – all within a framework of what is good for children and what kind of world they want them to grow up in. It is not a ‘touchy feely’ approach but one that challenges attitudes so that the implications of what has been identified can be examined openly and honestly and in sensitive and non-threatening ways. Its successes are clear in the participants’ very positive evaluations.

It seems to me that such an approach could break down the serious disjunction between what is happening and what is needed. But initially it means more time and therefore more funding and other resources. As with so many other early years issues, investment now is money well spent over time.

**What do you think? Do you think the present training on racial equality is adequate and effective? What priority do we put on getting rid of racism – a scourge in our society?**

As ever, please contact TACTYC with your responses

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<sup>1</sup> subsequent to this incident, and after some discussion, she decided to talk about ‘round’ people instead – she had understood how her negative opinion was hurtful and wrong.

<sup>2</sup> details of the book including reviews, the contents pages and other information, are available on the publications website of the National Children’s Bureau, [www.ncb.org.uk](http://www.ncb.org.uk)

<sup>3</sup> for information on a group of black early years workers whose voices are insufficiently heard, contact Patrice Lawrence at the National Children’s Bureau –

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[plawrence@ncb.org.uk](mailto:plawrence@ncb.org.uk). An email newsletter is open to anyone, black or white who is interested.

<sup>4</sup> although the term 'training' is in common usage, I prefer 'education' as having a less mechanistic approach and dimension.

<sup>5</sup> coined by Sue Owen, director of the Early Childhood Unit, National Children's Bureau.

<sup>6</sup> for a report of the media furore see [www.irr.org.uk](http://www.irr.org.uk) *Media hysteria around new book*.

<sup>7</sup> see Kapasi, H and Lane, J (2008) *Approaching race equality training in the Early Years*. Race Equality Teaching, Summer.

<sup>8</sup> for details see website of Inspire [www.inspire.eu.com](http://www.inspire.eu.com)