



making mixed race matter

Mixed Race and Education

A report of two People in Harmony seminars held in September 2014 and April 2015

August 2015

It is ten years since PIH issued a conference report on mixed race and education. This was the report of the 2005 annual conference: *Mixed Race and Education: creating an ethos of respect and understanding*.

Since this time very little seems to have changed in relation to the way in which mixed race pupils experience school. Whilst there has been a disproportionately greater growth of young people in the mixed race category, schools still rarely identify the particular needs of this group of pupils or ensure that the school environment reflects the history of mixedness as well as the histories of black and white people.

Several organisations/academics offer training and support to schools, for example Mix-d (www.mix-d.org) has done a great deal to develop teaching materials, but the reach of such programmes is limited.

As identified at the 2005 conference, statistics on school achievement of the mixed group vary with the type of



Respond Academy at 2014 Seminar

mix, showing some mixed race pupils doing better than their white peers and others trailing far behind. This is a very heterogeneous group of young people and one size does not fit all. Class and gender, as well as a mixed identity, also play a significant role in the educational outcomes of this group.

PIH has now revisited the subject of mixed race and education, holding a seminar in September 2014 and a follow-up debate in April 2015. The focus of these two events was on the stories of young people as they spoke about their education journey. A brief synopsis of the two events follows.

Making Mixed Race Matter

People in Harmony

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mixed race and education

The September seminar was opened by Rushanara Ali, Member of Parliament for Bethnal Green and Bow. She described her own educational experience and emphasised the importance of raising the commitment of politicians to the 50% of young people who do not go to university in order to achieve clearer pathways for all young people from school to work/vocational education.

Clive Webster, a mixed race educationist and schools academies director, demonstrated that by striving and aiming high, and maintaining high expectations, he was able to attain the top positions that he had enjoyed as a mixed race education professional. He suggested that PIH had a role in encouraging young people to reach the top of their chosen field. This might be through mentoring, the use of role models and the development of specific leadership schemes. Clive acknowledged that some parents had started support schemes and that some of this is happening already. There was a role for PIH in supporting such sub groups with similar ventures.

Sir Keith Ajegbo, a mixed race ex head teacher, leadership manager and trustee of the Steven Lawrence Foundation, asked us to consider in more detail the contradictions of 'race as a concept'. He reiterated the suggestion that PIH might want to work more with universities and students to promote more research into the changing experiences of being mixed race and British.

We need to use the lived experiences of those participating in the seminar to make recommendations to teachers. He stressed the need for advocacy schemes to target key issues affecting mixed race students.

These presentations were followed by statements by mixed race young people from the Respond Academy in Hastings (www.respondacademy.com) and spoke movingly of their experiences, citing the continuing use of pejorative language to describe mixedness. This highlighted the fact that young people want to identify in their own ways and with the mix that they are comfortable with, but what they had to say brought home once again that racism is still a major factor. Although this may not be experienced in the classroom, where it was generally felt things had improved, there was no guarantee that there was the same improvement in the playground or elsewhere in the school environment.

What they had to say demonstrated a lack of awareness amongst teachers and others in schools

of mixed race issues and the subsequent lack of support for mixed race pupils. Other topics needed more discussion, such



*Above: Clive Webster, Speaker.
Right: Susann Savidge PIH Chair.*



as what words to use for mixed race and who the mixed race role models were.

The seminar ended with people feeling they had much more to say and consequently a follow-up debate was arranged.

The April 2015 debate was facilitated by Martin and Asher Hoyles (www.biblio.com/unbound/2008/3/Hoyles.html), educators and authors of a number of books on race and culture. The debate was constructed to address four specific topics that had arisen from the earlier seminar.

One: Experiences of Teacher Discrimination and Racism – a chance to share experiences and discuss strategies

Young people and parents talked about racism and discrimination in school.

Some felt it was the curriculum content that did not acknowledge the mixed race presence and so it was impossible to learn about mixed race achievers etc. Others identified a poor learning environment that failed to stimulate an awareness of mixed race students and families.

One of the students observed that a small nursery child was better able to integrate after a period of help to socialise as a mixed race boy. She said that better resources would have enabled this sooner. Another student explained that he felt teacher stereotyping meant that there was an incorrect assumption about his needs. How you would like to be seen may need different help, not help that is pre decided.

You should say how you would like to be seen. Appearance – how people look and skin colour – often determines this incorrectly. The default position applied to mixed race people is usually black. It is important for teachers and others to understand the experiences of mixed race



Lokesh Ryouko, spoken word artist, rapper and attendee at Respond Academy

people and stereotypes are not helpful. Several people voiced feelings of discrimination against race and religion. Making teachers listen was seen to be hard.

A parent who felt that black parents may be judged for having mixed race children, asked for more role models. Even though his daughters were doing well in school there were few role models in a mainly white part of Essex. The Communities Empowerment Network (www.cenlive.org) was cited as an organisation that would provide in-school help and support,

particularly around exclusions. Other organisations identified for support were Mosaic, Respond, and Mix-d. Many of these have advocacy strategies that can assist and support young students.

The facilitators stressed that mixed race people need to know how to deal with confrontation. Confidence building is important and it helps to move through an environment that makes you feel better, for example, where there are pictures of mixed race people.

Two: Terminology – a discussion of terms used to describe mixed race people, what they mean and what may be the preferred terms currently being used

Some labels for mixed race were discussed to help delegates to understand the significance of and origins of such terms, which have international connotations. For example, half caste originating from the Latin for pure; mulatto meaning mule and implying infertility; kinder egg – a reference to the chocolate egg which is white on the inside. The

most popular and approved of term is mixed race but it was acknowledged that anger, when being on the receiving end of derogatory name calling, can build up into aggression and violence if there is no checking mechanism in place.

Whilst some participants were keen to point out the importance of acknowledging and understanding that genetically we are all one race, it was accepted that this was not the lived experience of most participants. In particular pigmentocracy – social hierarchy of those with a certain skin tone, regardless of race or socioeconomic status – still exists in many countries today.

The facilitators strongly emphasised that students/young people need to have the life skills to point out to others the label/category that they were willing to accept. Students need to develop the language as a resource in dealing with certain labels. Children today should have a repertoire of strong responses to identity.

Three: Mixed Race Achievements – a discussion of famous or notable mixed race people as role models for young people, their achievements and their influence on mixed race identity

From Mary Seacole, through William Cuffay and Bob Marley to Tiger Woods, Louis Hamilton, Halle Berry, Barack Obama and Chuka Umunna,

participants had many names to put forward. A long stream of famous mixed race achievers, both modern and historical, began to develop a solid bank of role models that could be used to stimulate and encourage a strong sense of self worth in mixed race students. The depiction of some of these high achieving people in schools would do much to enhance the environment for mixed race pupils and to educate the school community as a whole.

Four: Education in the Home and Community – an opportunity to discuss best practice for educating young people about their identity outside of the school system

The importance of parents in educating their children about mixed race and any consequent issues was seen as key. Parents should start with incidental learning, that is by learning things related to being mixed at home. They should go out of their way to have a positive approach at home, ensuring that 'mixed' values are encouraged.

Parents must take responsibility for their relationship choice, they made the borders and should choose difference in a positive way. The importance of fluidity in culture was stressed – as we live in hybrid culture we need to embrace all cultures and not just one. People need real tools and solid foundations, and to be aware that they have allies such as the members of People

in Harmony. Peer led initiatives were seen to be important and small changes, such as the general availability of black and Asian dolls, would support a positive identity.

The debate ended with a sense of déjà vu, that racism has to some extent been dismantled but that it is still very much alive in too many settings, with schools not doing as much as they could to affirm the identities of mixed race children and young people. ■



Discussions at the Open Debate