

The experiences of black and minority ethnic young people following the transition to secondary school¹

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Interviews were carried out with 56 young people in Secondary 1 and 2 classes about their experiences following the transition to secondary school, as well as with 19 parents and education staff. Most children coped well with the move. Peer relations were central to the process and usually new friendships were formed with schoolmates from both the same and different ethnic backgrounds as their own. However, peer racism was also reported to be greater than in primary school and to have increased since the early months in secondary. Common responses to verbal racism were ignoring, explaining and joking. Bullying and gang fights were also described. Teachers were seen by young people to have a key role dealing with racist incidents but were also often described as ineffective in doing so.

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INTRODUCTION

The study described in this report follows on from earlier surveys of children in Primary 7 and Secondary 1 classes about the processes and programmes involved in the transition to secondary school. Particular consideration was given to the similarities and differences in experience related to ethnic background. The findings were reported in an earlier *Spotlight* (Graham & Hill, 2003). This new research aimed to explore in more depth some of the issues arising from the surveys, by means of qualitative interviews.

Quite a lot is known from American and English research about the transition to secondary school, but relatively little data is available from Scotland (though see Stradling & MacNeil, 2000; Zeedyk *et al*, 2003). Besides adding to knowledge in a Scottish context, the previous and present studies aimed to examine the place of ethnicity in the transition and take account of the transition programmes that have evolved over the last 10 years or so. Research elsewhere has indicated that children of certain ethnic backgrounds encounter greater difficulties than average at transition (Galton & Morrison, 2000), but this issue has not been examined before in Scotland, with its very different ethnic mix.

Surveys were carried out in 2002–3, whereby questionnaires were distributed to 268 children in P7 and 343 pupils in S1 from three school clusters in the West of Scotland. A follow-up questionnaire was completed by 173 of the original P7 sample, two months after they had moved to secondary school. About two-thirds of the children who took part in the surveys were Scottish-white, and the others were black and minority ethnic (BME), mainly of Scottish-Pakistani identity.

The surveys showed that :

- Most young people were anxious about the move but settled quickly and well in secondary school.
- Over a quarter did not attend transition programmes.
- The transition programmes were seen as helpful.
- There were few major differences according to ethnicity.
- White children had higher proportions than did black and minority ethnic children who were performing academically both very well and poorly.
- Some black and minority ethnic children voiced concerns about lack of respect for their customs and disappointment about doing less well academically than they had hoped.

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THE PRESENT RESEARCH

Informed by the conclusions of the surveys, the aims of the present study were to:

- Understand in more detail the extent to which black and minority ethnic children felt their ethnicity was accepted and respected or not
- Explore whether, and if so how, this changed following the move to secondary school.

Participants for the study were recruited via a range of community projects and schools. It was recognised that refugee children have particular considerations that were beyond the scope of this study to explore, so recruitment for the study focused on young people who were born in Scotland or who had lived here at least five years. In all, 56 young people aged 11 to 13 took part. The children were asked to describe their own ethnic identity and most chose a dual nature, which combined a sense of Scottish-ness (or occasionally British-ness) and their family's national/ethnic heritage. Thus their ethnic backgrounds were as follows:

Scottish-Pakistani/Muslim	23
Scottish-Chinese	12
Scottish-Indian	11
Other, eg Somali	10
TOTAL	56

Additional insights were obtained from 19 adults (10 education professionals and 9 BME parents).

THE TRANSITION

For most of the children, the move to secondary school had been anticipated with considerable concern, but in the event they generally adjusted quickly and well. They said it offered them greater variety in what they were learning and more choice of friends. Secondary school promoted their sense of responsibility and encouraged them to develop and mature, both socially and academically. They said it engaged them more directly, allowing them greater participation in decisions about their own education.

"It's more free in secondary. You can basically do what you want and they treat you more like an adult."

"You get more freedom and more attention at secondary. It's better."

While some welcomed the freedom, others stressed that secondary school was stricter:

"Secondary school's much harder because they treat you more strict and expect you to be more grown up."

For a number of the young people, the general benefits were tarnished by what they saw as a growth in racism:

"There's a lot more to learn at secondary school but I don't really like going there because of racism. If I could change one thing about secondary school, I would want to be in the same classes as some of my friends."

"We don't get treated as much like children at secondary school. But if there's one thing I could change about it, it would be the racism that happens there."

FRIENDSHIPS

Pratt and George (2005) have highlighted that friendships, old and new, are central to children's experience of transition to secondary school, and that continuity of these is as important as continuity of curriculum. In the present study, the young people reported that they found it hard to 'lose' contact with some close friends from primary school. Those who had existing friends, siblings or cousins at the new school felt supported in managing the adjustment to the new school.

However, usually new friends were made quickly:

"On the first day I made a bunch of friends."

"It's been easy to make friends."

It was recognised that mechanisms such as class introductory exercises and guidance about befriending played a part in this:

"The school helped us with making new friends."

"My parents and teachers helped the most because they told you what to do and how to make friends."

"The school really helped a lot ... For the first couple of weeks all the classes were about talking to other people and getting to know them and relaxing."

Most children had friends of their own and different ethnic backgrounds:

"Muslims play with whites and whites play with Muslims."

"My friends are from all over."

However, some clustered according to background, especially as time went by:

"In the first year I hung around with lots of different children but now I spend a lot of time with children from the same backgrounds as me."

"Some Asians stick together ... It's safer."

ASPIRATIONS

The young people usually had high aspirations to do well at school and embark on a career. There was a strong awareness of parental expectations, which sometimes was experienced as constraint or pressure:

"My parents want me to get a better education, so I need to work well and do well in secondary."

"My Mum and Dad want me to be a lawyer."

"They want me to do more than I can do."

Just as common though was the sense that parents valued and supported their individual choices and interests:

"My Mum and Dad are really interested in what I do at school."

"They're not really bothered what I do as long as I'm happy."

EXPERIENCES OF RACISM

Nearly all the children in the sample had experienced or witnessed racist behaviour in secondary school. This was mostly from peers (not teachers) and mostly verbal. Examples included:

“They make fun of my name, because I’m Chinese.”

“She called me a racist name.”

“They all call me names and leave me out.”

As Arshad *et al* (2005) have observed, racism is seen by BME pupils as ‘a feature of daily life’ (p4).

Some reported racist bullying and fights by ethnically-based gangs. This was particularly, though not exclusively, mentioned by older boys, as the following quotes (both by males) illustrate:

“It’s the older people, like the gangsters and all that.”

“There’s loads more fights happening now, sometimes about racism and sometimes about other things.”

Both children and adults observed that some racist incidents occur between different groups within the BME population.

Racist incidents were generally thought by the young people to be more common in secondary than primary school:

“There are racist fights... and the teachers are a wee bit racist... It was alright in primary school, but it’s much worse here.”

“It’s a lot worse – I’m getting called names and all that... Primary school was a lot better. I got a lot more help with my English in primary school.”

“Our high school’s really racist and at primary school it wasn’t like that.”

Problems usually began later in the first year and increased in S2. This trend, described by many of the children, contrasts with official figures showing more reports of racist incidents in primary schools. Possibly, older children are more reluctant to report, for reasons discussed below.

RESPONDING TO RACISM

The children described a range of ways of dealing with racism, of which by far the most common took passive or conciliatory forms. Such coping mechanisms included:

Ignoring e.g.

“They make racist comment to me sometimes, but I don’t really care.”

“I’ve never done anything about racism.”

Explaining and discussing e.g.

“The best way to deal with racism is to talk about it in PSE.”

Joking e.g.

“They make fun of my surname, which I don’t really mind. I just take it as a laugh.”

Seeking support e.g.

“I talk to my sister about racism at school.”

However, some spoke about responding to aggression with aggression:

“I would fight if anyone picked on me.”

TEACHERS AND INTER-ETHNIC RELATIONS

According to the young people who took part in the study, teachers seldom acted in a directly racist way. Furthermore, both school policies and individual teachers were usually described as showing respect for different customs and religious practices:

“My religion is accepted at school.”

“They let us go to mosque... A lot of schools don’t do that.”

“I’m Sikh and they let me wear what I want.”

A minority did feel that they were discriminated against when choices were made about groups and individuals seen by teachers to be making trouble:

“Every time there’s a fight, the black people get suspended, and when the white people start it, we get suspended and not them.”

More commonly teachers were criticised for passivity or ineffectiveness when dealing with peer racism among youth:

“Sometimes the teachers seem to get embarrassed by racist comments that they kind of ignore it – maybe because their own race is kind of doing it to another.”

“I speak to the teachers about the racism but they don’t do anything.”

When a teacher did take action, this could have negative repercussions for the individual who reported an incident:

“Teachers don’t do anything – they just suspend them and if they see you in the street later you get battered.”

On the other hand some young people did describe how teachers had been helpful:

“I talk to some of the teachers about problems I’m having with bullying and racism and school, and they do stuff about it.”

In one instance, though, this had resulted in the victim of racially based aggression having to change class:

“[The class] used to always sing songs at me, shout across the room, use rubbers to hit me. I told my guidance teacher and they let me move class.”

When asked to suggest ways of tackling racism, many of the young people offered a range of proposals, which indicated trust in the system to try and do something positive. Their suggestions involved different levels of response, from whole school preventive action to reactive measures by particular teachers:

“The best way to stop racism is for the head teacher to speak to the whole school for half an hour or something.”

“The best way to deal with racism is to tell the guidance teacher but there is not much they can do.”

As the second quote above indicates, comments were sometimes tinged with scepticism, and a few thought that young BME people needed to take action themselves as teachers were regarded as powerless:

“You know what teachers are like – they can’t do anything. You have to take things in your own hands.”

PARENTS’ VIEWS

All ten parents interviewed were confident that their children would make them aware of any racism at school, but only a few had been told of specific experiences of this:

“He says that in the playground older boys will come over and call him names for nothing or steal his ball and stuff like that... He really hates the school”

The absence of reporting of racist incidents could be attributed to taking it for granted, as one educationalist suggested:

“I don’t think they talk to their parents, because what has happened is that they have become conditioned to it. They’re used to it; it’s normal. It’s quite sad really”

Several parents emphasised that racism is not confined to the white majority.

On the whole, parents who were interviewed voiced more assertive opinions about responding to racism, compared with those of the children.

“Racism should not be accepted nowadays, especially in schools”

Parents described variable actions by teachers. Some praised the way incidents were tackled, but several believed that an inappropriate evidential approach was used, ie if the children did not supply details and names, then nothing was done.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The studies discussed above have highlighted the views of black and minority ethnic young people about their experience during and following the transition to secondary school. On the whole, schools appear successful in making the adjustment relatively smooth and in supporting young people to establish friendships at the start of secondary school. There is scope for facilitating continuity of prior friendships and extending buddy systems.

Hardly any young people reported racism by their secondary teachers, and the majority felt that their culture or religion was respected. However, according to most of the young people interviewed, peer racism increased in secondary schools as compared with that in primary schools. Also many felt less confident about confiding in teachers or about teachers’ ability to deal with this

effectively. It seems that measures are needed to enable pupils to be better supported by guidance teachers. Current training on equality issues, statistical monitoring and anti-discriminatory practice appears insufficient to equip teachers with the skills necessary to deal with such issues and therefore needs extending in scope.

Children find it easier to approach friends and fellow pupils about racism and bullying. Developing forums for peer mediation within schools, such as bullying groups and the like, would perhaps capitalise on this. Young people in the study valued initiatives such as *Show Racism the Red Card* and TAG theatre plays. These provisions, as well as others tailored to the Scottish context, could be offered regularly as part of all schools’ personal and social education curriculum.

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Contact

For further information about the research, or to obtain a copy of the full report, please contact the Glasgow Centre for the Child and Society. Full contact details are on their website: <<http://www.gccs.gla.ac.uk>>.

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Tragically, shortly after the end of this study, the main researcher Cat Caulfield died suddenly at the early age of 27 following an accident on holiday. She is much missed by her colleagues and this document is dedicated to her memory.