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Resisting dominant discourses of racially boundaried selves and the implications for formal schooling

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Background

Race has been defined in many different ways throughout history. Even now, social theorists do not agree on the meaning of the notion of race (Solomos, 1993). In the past, race was most frequently understood as a natural, biological, scientific difference which could not be bridged and a legitimate way of categorising humans. In biological theories of race, individuals are seen in terms of essential characteristics, believed to be natural properties of certain bodies. Physical characteristics have been used to 'prove' inferiority and justify oppression, exploitation and enslavement. Biological notions of race have now been scientifically disproved (Gates, 1985; Solomos, 1993), and much recent research focuses on the social construction of race, by which is meant that race is actually made rather than inherently present. This shift in understanding has enabled us to see race as complex and dynamic rather than fixed and natural. The risk with the social constructionist view, is that the lived experience of race and racial oppression can sometimes be forgotten, thereby promoting the idea that race no longer matters.

Equally, classic theories of racism relate to biological notions of race and describe it as discrimination on the grounds of real or invented physical commonalities which are attributed to a perceived group and linked to internal characteristics. In recent years, however, biological arguments have become socially unacceptable, and racism has changed, to focus instead on cultural incompatibility (Gilroy, 1987; Solomos, 1993; Zenger, 1997). Discourses of fixed cultural difference seem in a way to break with previous, biological notions of racism, but in fact, they have a similar impact: cultural differences are still viewed as fixed, innate and essential and culture becomes tied to phenotype, as an inescapable, inherent characteristic (Gilroy, 1987; Gillborn, 1995).

Research Questions

Dominant discourses about race in the UK are still characterised by essentialised notions of racial difference. Culturally racist discourses tend to position ethnic minorities as essentially 'different' to, leading lives incompatible with those of, and even posing a threat to, white people. In this way, race and notions of Britishness and national belonging (Gilroy, 1987) become linked. Educational policy is underpinned by contradictory discourses: it tends to be both deracialised, suggesting that race no longer matters, yet continues to be underpinned by the notion that ethnic minorities are inherently 'different'. Indeed, the definition of 'race' given in the Citizenship Glossary on the QCA website for the recently introduced Citizenship Education implies that race is a valid physical classification, giving credence to biological notions of race. This paper considers the ways in which minority ethnic young people in KS 4 negotiate discourses around racial identity and the meaning of race in this context and the implications for educational practice.

Methods

The paper draws on data collected for a recently completed ethnographic study which focused on minority ethnic students' school experiences. The young people were not asked explicitly about the role of race, however, in almost every focus group conducted, race and racism in education and wider society became an important topic, which the researcher then followed up. Focus groups were conducted with groups of 3-5 young people in KS4 from five schools in the north of England. Much weight has been given to the voices and perceptions of the young people, whose voices tend to be silenced, in order to produce a counternarrative to official, dominant discourses (Weedon, 1997; Ladson-Billings & Donner, 2005). As the researcher is a white female, care has been taken to

problematise power dynamics in interview situations where the hegemony of neo-colonialism could be recreated (Archer, 2003; Tuhiwai Smith, 2003).

Frame

The data is analysed using Critical Race Theory in order to foreground the frequently hidden racial aspect of interaction and situate the findings in a broader framework of structural racism (e.g. Ladson-Billings & Donner, 2005; Soloranzo & Yosso, 2002; Lynn, 2006). It also draws on Butler's (1993, 1997, 2004) and Youdell's (2003, 2006) notion of performativity, which theorises that identities are discursively and performatively constituted, by which is not meant that identities are not real, rather that they are shifting and dynamic. Identities are understood as performed onto groups and individuals by policy, discourses, and other individuals, and individuals in turn perform these identities. The fact that various different discourses are performed onto an individual mean that identity discourses can, to a certain extent, be resisted.

Research findings

The findings suggest that that race can be seen as performed: the young people resist fixed and essential notions of racial identities and contest dominant discourses around race. They move between discourses, showing how their notions of racial identity are shifting and at times, contradictory. On the one hand they talk of oppositional identities to the norming forces of whiteness. On the other hand they define the categories of black and white as shifting political attitudes rather than ethnic groups, which challenges the notion of race as a biological category.

However, it is argued that oppositional identities should not be seen as representative of an authentic, homogeneous black identity, rather the categories are mobilised politically to challenge white supremacist discourses which constitute the young people as 'different'. Equally, the discussion suggests that despite notions of race being a social construction, for many people, the reality of the pervasiveness of deeply engrained discourses of racial difference means their sense of self remains very essentialised. Although the young people demonstrate agency in the way they invert dominant society's racial norms, resisting the construction of black as outside the boundaries of the norm, their talk at times demonstrates how limited agency can be in the face of the strength of the discourses which constitute them in essentialised ways.

The discussions are underpinned by notions of the complexity, multiplicity and performativity of identities and challenge homogenising and fixed notions of race and culture found in current educational discourses in the UK and carry important implications for the teaching of issues around race and identity.