ADRIAN HART

THE MYTH OF RACIST KIDS

ANTI-RACIST POLICY AND THE REGULATION OF SCHOOL LIFE

MANIFESTO CLUB

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Anti-racist policy and the regulation of school life

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MANIFESTO CLUB
FOR FREEDOM IN EVERYDAY LIFE

A school playground is a mess of exuberant sociability, of running, shouting, falling-out, making-up, showing off, teasing – and there is something deeply wrong when these childish games become a matter for officials and even the police. The idea that three-year-olds can be 'racist', and require specialists to train them out of their prejudice, amounts to a notion that we are born sinners and only officialdom can save us.

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RACIST INCIDENT REFERRAL FORM (internal school use only) **Form RI 1**

Used to notify headteacher/named member of SMT as soon as possible after incident has taken place. Each incident to be referred separately. Forms to be collected from/returned to school office.

Ref. no. 1 2 (Office to enter ref. no.)

Details of alleged incident

Name(s) of alleged victim(s)
Child B
Child C

Alleged victim(s)	✓	M/F	Further information (e.g. year group of pupil)
Pupil	✓	M	Yr 3
Teaching staff			
Other staff			
Parent/carer			
Governor			
Visitor			
Other			

Name(s) of alleged perpetrator(s)
Child A

Alleged perpetrator(s)	✓	M/F	Further information (e.g. year group of pupil)
Pupil	✓	M	Yr 3
Teaching staff			
Other staff			
Parent/carer			
Governor			
Visitor			
Other			

Name(s) of possible witnesse(s)
None

Alleged witness(es)	✓	M/F	Further information (e.g. year group of pupil)
Pupil			
Teaching staff			
Other staff			
~~Parent/carer~~			
Governor			
Visitor			
Other			

Type of incident
Tick (✓) all boxes in table below that apply.
See over (lower part of page) for explanation of categories.

Physical assault	
Physical intimidation	
Verbal abuse	✓
Insensitive/inappropriate remarks/comments/jokes	
Racist graffiti	
~~Written comments/drawings~~ (not graffiti)	
Abuse of/damage to personal property	
Non-co-operation/disrespect/ostracism	
Other	

Date/time of incident
10·9·08

Place where incident occurred
Playground

What happened?
If there is insufficient space below, further sheets may be attached to this form.

Child A was arguing with child B + C, child A called them both a chocolate bar.

Action already taken. Please provide brief details, if known.
If there is insufficient space below, further sheets may be attached to this form.

Child A Spoken to severely · Next step parents involvement letter & Head teacher aware · loss of lunch/playtime for child A

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Used to notify headteacher / named member of SMT as soon as possible after incident has taken place. Each incident to be referred separately. Forms to be collected from / returned to school office.

Ref. no. (4)
(Office to enter ref. no.)

Details of alleged incident

Name(s) of alleged victim(s)
Male Pupil

Name(s) of alleged perpetrator(s)
Female Pupil

Alleged victim(s)	✓	M/F	Further information (e.g. year group of pupil)
Pupil	✓	M	
Teaching staff			
Other staff			
Parent/carer			
Governor			
Visitor			
Other	✓	M	

Alleged perpetrator(s)	✓	M/F	Further information (e.g. year group of pupil)
Pupil	✓	F	
Teaching staff			
Other staff			
Parent/carer			
Governor			
Visitor			
Other			

Name(s) of possible witnesse(s)

Type of incident
Tick (✓) all boxes in table below that apply.
See over (lower part of page) for explanation of categories.

Alleged witness(es)	✓	M/F	Further information (e.g. year group of pupil)
Pupil			
Teaching staff			
Other staff			
Parent/carer			
Governor			
Visitor			
Other			

Physical assault	
Physical intimidation	
Verbal abuse	✓
Insensitive/inappropriate remarks/comments/jokes	
Racist graffiti	
Written comments/drawings (not graffiti)	
Abuse of/damage to personal property	
Non-co-operation/disrespect/ostracism	
Other	

Date/time of incident
1pm 3-10-08

Place where incident occurred
Playground-football

What happened?
If there is insufficient space below, further sheets may be attached to this form.

Disagreement playing football

Female pupil called male pupil "White trash!"

Action already taken. Please provide brief details, if known.
If there is insufficient space below, further sheets may be attached to this form.

Severly spoken to + warned next step parent involvement
loss of lunch time play for Female pupil

Copies of submitted racist incident forms, with children's names removed

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The Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 led to a reqirement on schools to report 'racist incidents' to local authorities, which has resulted in the reporting of an estimated 250,000 incidents. Many of these 'racist incidents' involved very young children: the majority of recent incidents in Yorkshire schools were in primary schools, and the majority of Essex Council's incidents between 2002–5 were in age 9–11. Anti-racist officials believe that these incidents are the 'tip of the iceberg', and call on schools to step up identification and reporting, and extend reporting to even younger age groups.

Schools are being encouraged to use a broad definition of 'racism', including name-calling in the playground and excluding other children from games. One anti-racist theatre professional interviewed for this report explains that 'leaving someone out because of their race is also racism', a message he sought to communicate to 7-year-olds in London. As a result, incidents are being reported where the 'victim' didn't complain, and the six-year-old perpetrator was confused and worried that they had 'done racism'.

CPS prosecutions for racist or religious offences for ages 10–17 rose from 404 in 2005/06 to 2916 in 2007/08. There were 4,410 temporary and permanent exclusions as a result of racist abuse in the year 2006–07, and 350 of these occurred in primary schools.

Anti-racist educators claim that children as young as three can be racist, and teachers are being given special training to deal with 'racist incidents' in their classrooms. In Glasgow, nursery schools were sent an anti-racist pack, on the basis that 'the earlier you can pick up any tendency towards discriminatory or prejudicial behaviour, the better chance you have of successfully tackling it'. Nursery schools

have been encouraged to report racist incidents to their local councils. Several nursery schools in Kent are training staff in challenging racist statements from toddlers.

Officials use the notion of 'institutional racism' as a pretext for the intervention into school life, encroaching on teachers' ability to resolve disputes and bad behaviour within their classrooms. Teachers are obliged to fill in forms, or even to call in the police, rather than resolve playground situations themselves.

Yet the notion of racist kids is in large part a myth. Psychological studies showing three-year-old prejudice have been subjected to heavy criticism. Thankfully, racism is declining in society at large, and especially in schools, where children are increasingly expressing their natural colour-blindness, and building peer groups of many different ethnicities. Very young children cannot, in fact, be racist, or at least not in the way that adults imagine: they do not yet have systematic beliefs about social groups or ethnicity. If they use words adults consider extremely offensive, they often do so without understanding their meaning.

Indeed, anti-racist policy itself has become a key racialising influence in schools: its result is to encourage children to identify with their ethnic group, and to consider their relationships with children from other ethnic groups as fraught and somehow different. Through events such as Black History Month or Holocaust Memorial Day, children are encouraged to 'think race'. Some teachers report that 'awareness-raising' assemblies lead to an immediate outbreak of 'racial incidents'. One teacher reported that their school's anti-racist intervention has 'created an absolutely awful atmosphere around the school. Children who used to play beautifully together are starting to separate along racial lines'.

Racism has become a catchall explanation for some children's educational difficulties, particularly with African Caribbean boys. This mystifies the socio-economic and social causes of educational failure. Worse than this, the 'race' narrative can actually contribute towards the exclusion of some groups, encouraging them to expect failure and to take a hostile attitude towards schools and teachers, in what Adrian Hart calls a 'permanent victimhood defined by their race'.

Anti-racism measures in schools have been put beyond criticism, with anybody who questions their efficacy seen as just 'not getting it'. Currently, criticisms must often be whispered in staffrooms or behind the veil of anonymity. We need to break this censorious silence and hold these measures up for scrutiny. And we need to have an open debate about how to realise the vibrant future of social diversity, which our children want and deserve.

Manifesto Club Publications seek to tell stories from the frontline of social life, exposing the growth of state regulation into everyday life on the streets, in workplaces and in our private lives. As part of this series, we are pleased to publish Adrian Hart's investigation of anti-racist policy in schools.

A school playground is a mess of exuberant sociability, of running, shouting, falling-out, making-up, showing off, teasing – and there is something deeply wrong when these childish games become a matter for officials and even the police. The idea that three-year-olds can be 'racist', and require specialists to train them out of their prejudice, amounts to a notion that we are born sinners and only officialdom can save us.

Hart tells the story of anti-racist policy from the inside, in all the richness of events as they unfolded, including discussions that simmered in staffrooms and over email, and children's remarks in playgrounds and classrooms. Although the report draws on his particular experience, this is for the illustration of general trends rather than criticism of any particular individuals or organisations; it is likely that cited case studies would be found much the same in schools across the UK.

This book is published in a spirit of enthusiasm for growing social diversity; and in celebration of the possibilities for friendships, partnerships and relationships of collaboration between people from different origins and nationalities. It is also published in the spirit of open debate, raising questions about policies that you are not *supposed* to question – a conspiracy of silence that can only squash good sense and good faith.

Josie Appleton
Convenor, Manifesto Club

Since 2002 UK schools have been required to report 'racist incidents' to their local education authority. The government's recommended definition of a racist incident is 'any incident perceived to be racist by the victim or any other person'. Local government race officials now encourage and advise schools to operate a 'zero-tolerance' approach to anything in the daily life of school that anyone feels might have been racist.

As a consequence children's playground spats have become elevated into full-blown sagas, occasionally involving the police if not the Crown Prosecution Service. 'Racist incidents' (the vast majority of which are defined as 'verbal racism') routinely pass into official statistics. Despite complaints from diversity officials that schools are failing to adequately fulfil their legal duties, many thousands of incidents are nonetheless reported to local authorities nationwide. This has led to a powerful myth that racism is rife in British schools: and more specifically, to *the myth of racist kids*.

In 2006 I was hired to make an educational film for Essex primary schools to address the problem of racism among 10- and 11-year olds. I visited a number of schools but could find no evidence of racism. Black and other ethnic minority children seemed to me to mix harmoniously with the white majority. 'Videobox' sessions on the theme of name-calling revealed scant evidence of anything that could be defined as racist. Teachers were adamant that these were good schools. However, the anti-racism 'awareness-raising' workshops commissioned by the local authority (which I observed in each of these schools) seemed imbued with the single principle that I perceive underpinning all official anti-racism – that society is beset with 'institutional' racism, implicating each and every one of us. Further, that any evidence of racism – however small – is merely 'the tip of the iceberg'.

Over the past decade the state has set up a salaried apparatus

to manage 'race-relations'. Among these representatives there is now an angry lobby demanding schools be put under more pressure to report racist incidents and that more funding be found for race-relations initiatives. I argue the opposite – that our schools need a great deal less official anti-racism. Today's anti-racist educators may have the best of intentions but their missionary zeal reifies race, exaggerates racism and profoundly misunderstands children. The awareness-raising drama workshops I observed seemed at odds with children's real concerns and real relationships with one another. In these workshops children who mixed freely with one another in an open-minded and colour-blind manner were encouraged to see themselves and their peers in racial and ethnic terms.

My criticism of the racialising character of these workshops seemed to confound the drama tutors running them. 'A child has a right to a positive identity, not an ignored one', I was told: minority ethnic children are 'entitled to a collective identity … to belong to their group'. And so I observed a strange and concerning phenomenon: in modern cosmopolitan Britain where race is becoming less and less relevant, and where children often have friends from many different ethnic groups, *the dominant racialising influence on children is anti-racist policy itself*. It is state anti-racist policy that is keeping the question of race alive at a time when many people – especially children – are living increasingly colour-blind lives.

Throughout the years that I have worked in schools and youth theatres the celebration of difference has been assumed to be a key ingredient in 'enabling' and 'empowering' young people. Many of my colleagues will say that what children have in common should also be celebrated – but this is seldom evident within anti-racist education. Typically renamed 'cultural' identity or simply 'diversity', it is nonetheless the celebration of *racial* difference that has become increasingly viewed as critical to individual and social well-being. To do otherwise, say anti-racists, tramples on minority identities and expresses a colour-blindness that is tantamount to racism-denial.

This report will demonstrate that government race policy has little to do with racism in schools, and far more to do with the creation of a new layer of government race 'missionaries' (academics, consultants, advisors and bureaucrats) who scrutinise, monitor and advise upon children's relationships with each other and with their teachers.

Above all, I want to reinstate something that teachers know but sometimes feel obliged to forget. Children are not badly behaved mini-adults, and the ways in which they think, learn and develop cannot be

judged by adult standards. Perhaps by age 10–11 a few have begun to understand what racism means but it is only through the transition to adulthood that conscious racist belief might take shape. More than a pressing social problem, the notion of racist kids expresses the way in which officials have come to see children's spontaneous interactions and inclinations as tainted.

From the age of three, we are told, children need educating out of the prejudice that they are liable to show towards one another. With their first words, they have 'learned racism' and are therefore in need of re-education. Moreover, anti-racist policy in schools represents a particular incrimination of white working-class kids, who are assumed to be the main culprits – in need of a large dose of workshops and re-education.

Of course schools should and frequently do discipline children for name-calling and bullying, just as for any other form of anti-social behaviour. But the fact that children are required to respect adult authority in the classroom does not alter their need to engage – at break-time – in unfettered peer interaction.[1] In this sphere adults should take a step back and allow children the freedom to flourish. We must remember that despite children's tendency to be both cruel and vulnerable they are, in fact, *resilient learners*. There is a solid body of child-development expertise rooted in Lev Vygotsky, Jean Piaget, and Jerome Bruner, which emphasises the importance of allowing children autonomy (Margaret Donaldson's *Children's Minds*, David Wood's *How Children Think and Learn,* and many more). Yet this insight now seems to be overruled by the handbooks of adult interventionist thinking (notably *The Bully, the Bullied and the Bystander: From Preschool to Secondary School – How parents and teachers can help break the cycle of violence*, by Barbara Coloroso; and recently, *Racist Incidents and Bullying in Schools – how to prevent them and how to respond when they happen*, by Robin Richardson and Berenice Miles).

The new anti-racism imposes a deficit model on to children. They are always apparently in need of protection or correction. It also imposes a deficit model on to *teachers* who can no longer be trusted to deal with minor name-calling incidents within their classrooms and playgrounds. Whole schools are gently informed that institutional racism is an inevitable feature of their organisation which, after all, is 'subject to the same sub-conscious conditioning as the rest of society'.[2] With teaching staff/pupils/parents all 'at risk' of racism, it seems only state anti-racist law and 'advice' can be trusted to protect us from ourselves. State anti-racist missionaries suggest that the whole of

society is tainted, and in so doing they cast themselves as our saviours and absolvers.

The losers are children. Not just in terms of the fetter placed on their ability to develop – but also the future they *might* have invented. One head teacher described to me his frustration over the target-driven arrogance of government race laws. His school was complying with all its legal duties to report racist incidents, taking care to adopt the recommended definition and apply zero-tolerance. But for him, anti-racism was about something else, something intrinsic to a school environment increasingly energised by diversity itself. Children from a range of backgrounds enter his school and engage in a level of interaction and co-operation that simply doesn't exist in the world outside. He described his school as an 'oasis'.[3] I worked in this same school and it is evident that children are thriving. In this school anti-racism had nothing to do with policing behaviour, teaching 'identity' or rolling out annual multicultural pageants – and everything to do with building on the cohesion generated naturally day-to-day. But the time and effort spent trying to satisfy the demands of 'official' anti-racism offered no benefit to the school. Instead teachers are reduced to the level of police-station counter staff as they fill out forms and attempt to explain to children – sometimes only six or seven years old – that they have inadvertently committed an offence that adults call 'racism'. Frequently these incidents involve a 'victim' who hasn't even made a complaint and words that only an adult onlooker has felt match the definitions supplied by government 'advice'.[4]

The futile exercise of official anti-racism hinders the potential for schools to develop their diverse communities of children. Staff resign themselves to a 'we don't make the rules' approach and relinquish their authority to establish moral standards and negotiate disputes and conflicts.

It is perhaps testament to many head teachers – such as the one mentioned above – that they find ways to fulfil the obligations of official anti-racism, without foregoing the school's efforts to build on children's natural inclination to be tolerant and empathise with one another. He had this to say:

> *We're not interested in slotting anti-racism into the curriculum just so we can tick a box. We're trying to do something much more subtle so that the spirit of anti-racism flows through the curriculum more seamlessly. We build on children's empathy – right now we're running cross-curricula projects that link us with schools in several countries around the world.*

One consequence of this school's efforts was that racist incidents – even by government standards – were becoming quite rare.

> *We have to record incidents but they're rare. A couple of times the County got in touch because we hadn't reported any incidents for a couple of terms … . You can't win this one – if you don't report incidents you're told you're not being aware of racism – If you do report it there'll be someone who decides there's a major problem in the school.*[5]

It is hard to gauge how many primary schools attempt to tread the line like this. It is likely that many will either be ignoring the demands of official anti-racism altogether (and viewed suspiciously by local race officials) or embracing it as both a legal duty and emblematic of 'a good school'. But it is in these dutiful 'good schools' that the problems with official anti-racism will – if these policies are not challenged – become glaringly obvious. Indeed, as I will suggest in this report, the damaging consequences of incident reporting and the teaching of 'racial identity' are already emerging into view.

Rather than forcing schools into a rigid conformity with incident reporting and anti-racist workshops, policy should be backing schools in their efforts to enhance and invigorate diversity. Diversity flourishes from the moment disparate groups converge and affirm that which is universal and shared – be it education in the classroom or games at break time. This is something that schools and children are uniquely placed to do.

All stills from film *Only Human*, by Adrian Hart

PART 1

FRAMING RACISM IN UK SCHOOLS

1.1 WATCH OUT FOR RACISM!

The educational film that I was employed to make in 2006 represented one part of an anti-racism project called *'Watch Out for Racism!'*. Destined for use in Essex primary schools, a teaching pack had been commissioned to address 'the issue of racism amongst 9 to 11 year olds'. Apparently, analysis of racist incident data from schools across the county showed that the 'overwhelming majority' of incidents were taking place within this age group. The educational film was to be made with supervision and assistance from Greenwich and Lewisham Young People's Theatre (GLYPT)[6] and with the participation of children from four schools. I received the impression of schools suffering 'difficulties' as evidenced by the frequency of racist incidents. GLYPT asked me to observe their drama tutors engaged in exploring these difficulties and wider issues using 'awareness raising' anti-racist workshops.

However, children belonging to so-called 'black and minority ethnic' (BME) or 'mixed-heritage' categories in each school seemed confident, resilient and socially integrated into the mass of children. Staff told me that they did not consider their schools to be suffering any unusual problems. It quickly became apparent that these were essentially good schools with vibrant and diverse populations. They had simply been complying with the legal duty to identify, record and report racist incidents – defined broadly as 'any incident perceived to be racist by the victim or any other person'.

The desire for an educational film had apparently emerged, not from any racism breaking out in Essex schools, but from the top-down priorities of race relations officials. In a briefing document Essex Council said that it wanted the film as a classroom resource that would cover 'aspects of the non-statutory national framework for Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) and Citizenship'. It also hoped