

Listening to Parents and Carers Talking About Race

*A Hackney Schools Group Board Inquiry
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Childs and Andrea Powell, co-chairs of
Belonging for All Panel In collaboration with
Hackney parents and six Hackney Schools.*

*Written by Eleanor Schooling CBE,
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Introduction

The joint chairs of the Belonging for All Panel of Hackney Schools Group Board worked with six Hackney schools in July 2020 and facilitated a meeting for parents at each school. We asked for volunteer schools and offered to listen to parents alongside the school leaders. For all of the schools this was a new forum for talking about race with parents.

The parents were incredibly candid about their views and experiences, and welcomed the opportunity to speak about issues at home, school and in wider society. Most importantly they found the forum a safe space to talk. Some were visibly emotional, not because they had grievances with their schools, but because they felt that finally they had the chance to be heard. On each occasion there were revealing and heartfelt insights about how schools are working positively to tackle issues of race, and important views about what could be different. Many parents praised the schools for what they were doing right. They showed a lot of confidence in schools, valuing their work and identifying what they cherished.

We were struck by how valuable each meeting was. For every school that finds a way to hear from Parents of Colour there will be important messages that can lead to sustainable and effective change. We felt surprised and dismayed by how long ago we had first heard many of these issues being raised, but this time there was a powerful sense that change can happen. Many of the changes or behaviours are simple and easy for everyone. For example: one child was thrilled by the compliment she got from her teacher for her new Afro, it gave her lasting confidence in school.

The parents who took part were considered and gave their thoughts generously in the hope these discussions would be shared more widely. We were all talking about race with a renewed and more shared vocabulary, and memorably one parent explained to everyone the importance of **“listening to understand and not to respond”**. Many of them felt it would be helpful to have similar sessions on a regular basis. This might go part of the way towards tackling the fact that some parents felt that they had to fight to get heard and this is emotionally draining.

Parents also commented that pupil voice is rich and valuable, and schools could help children to develop their skills in this area.

The views from all six schools and from Badu Community have been organised into themes, and bring together all views.

“Everyone is in a good place to start the process of healing”

Curriculum, its power to be transformative, and escaping tokenism

“[My son] doesn’t understand what Black History Month is about.”

Every group of parents commented on the curriculum. Many parents said that Black History should be incorporated as part of the curriculum and not just taught for a month. They felt that the curriculum should be less Eurocentric. Teaching positive stories, achievements and legacies is more important than falling back on slavery which tends to embed a victim or powerless view. Black History Month has often been about Black History in the US. For some parents it has added to a feeling of marginalisation as they are not part of that kind of Black, but a different ethnicity. Taking themes such as hair as a way of celebrating Black culture is a hugely positive way into a range of curriculum subjects and very affirming for children.

“Black people’s history didn’t start and end with slavery”

“You get the sense that something is only important once it has been discovered by Europeans”

Parents have seen much more of what their children were learning recently, and had valuable comments to make. They could see the challenges of teaching under lockdown for example when some children were asked to write pledges about anti-racism after the killing of George Floyd. Children sometimes said they did not want to do this as no-one really cared about it anyway. Surprisingly some

parents felt that schools used books that lack diversity and suggested a review of this would be an easy win.

Friendships across cultures and races and how schools make this happen

Even in schools where parents say that their children have a strong sense of belonging, children still separate themselves by ethnicity for example in the cafeteria. This seems to happen as children get older and so schools that think carefully about this are able to have an open conversation about why this happens. It’s a complex matter where at different ages children see the world in different ways. It’s important to respond without judging so that adults hear what children are really saying. Sometimes very young children can be dogmatic about ethnicity, and children from mixed heritages may tell one another they can’t be white, for example.

Young children’s comments to one another can also be very hurtful and not always intentionally so. One child was told no brown children were allowed at a party. It’s important to find ways of hearing these comments so children can be helped to understand why remarks like that are cruel. Although it’s not always easy for schools to know everything that happens, finding a way for issues like this to be spoken about is very important.

One school was highly praised for the number and range of its out of school activities that meant every child could be a part of something and make new friends outside the mainstream classroom. I felt this was a really positive solution that could get lost during the return to school that relies on bubbles and less interaction between groups of school children.

People of colour as teachers and school leaders

Parents were very clear that they felt senior leaders should reflect the demographic of the community. They were also very thoughtful about this and suggested that sometimes it was something invisible in the culture that made prospective teachers keen to work in certain schools and not others. They also explained that seeing People of Colour as senior leaders, school governors, and on the PTA did much to counteract other aspects of white bias, and gave children a strong sense that they had a place in leadership positions.

Language used to discuss race should be direct and overt. The time for worrying about what people will think must pass so that we can all be kind and able to hear one another's views. Conversations with parents often came back to the importance of teachers and parents having a better and more open understanding of one another's cultures, going beyond the very positive but insufficient celebrations of food and clothing.

Many parents commented on the challenge for teachers in knowing more about a non Eurocentric history, or culture. They felt parents themselves and the wider community could help teachers to know more. This is a powerful offer even in these busy times.

“Schools have often done well academically, but that is no excuse for a lack of diversity in teaching.”

Different expectations of children of colour and policy implementation

“Minority pupils grow up to learn things will be harder for them.”

The idea that Children of Colour have to work harder is passed down

from generation to generation. Of course knowing this is one thing, but repeatedly hearing it from parents was saddening and there was no escaping the fact that this still happens. In most schools, there were descriptions of policies that unconsciously discriminate, and parents asked for all policies and implementation of those policies to be reviewed for bias. Often a school's behaviour policy was commented upon both as a tool for tackling inequality as well as one that inadvertently had the opposite effect. In fact the issue of policy came up so frequently that all schools might want to take a look at these. One way to do this is to look at a single aspect of a single part of school life, (e.g. clubs, mealtimes,) and ask children to help to see how fair it is.

“The school is a good leveller. They [children] have been treated the same as their peers which is partly to do with the behaviour policy.”

Tackling overt racism is often clear and strong in policies and the way schools respond, it is the structural racism that is sometimes less well understood. For example, parents suggested schools should look at how many children from different backgrounds get awards and public praise. They also said that the strong discipline policies that exist, and are a welcome feature of many schools, could be used more to tackle unfairness.

The way that heritage is embedded in the recording and counting of school life is useful for monitoring but also has its downsides. Asking children (or parents) where they are from often contributes to a sense of not fitting in. Furthermore, asking children to choose an ethnic identity is fraught with difficulty, and often children choose an identity that sounds right even though they do not know what it is. Parents felt that ethnicity labels sometimes divide rather than celebrate.

Many parents commented on the way they felt that white children had more opportunities for extra-curricular activities, or even that they were not all for children of colour.

Challenging adult biases and behaviours in school and at the school gate

“We would love more ownership and involvement to support the school [and] other parents.”

Many parents wanted to be able to mix in different groups as adults themselves and they wanted to find ways to set a better example to their children, where adults are not segregated by race. The school gate is going to be a very different place in September, but that does not mean that change cannot come.

Parents suggested that anti-racism training would offer the space for children and adults to discuss and address issues without fear. This was commented upon a number of times and parents felt parents themselves could get a lot from unconscious bias training. Some parents went further to talk about conscious inclusion instead, and some parents felt that understanding unconscious bias doesn't really tackle structural inequalities as it focuses on the individual and not on societal issues.

Many parents commented on misunderstandings about culture, for example mistaking loudness for aggression. They told us that PTAs, Governing Bodies, exclusion committees, and similar structures often don't reflect the children in the school and parents felt that actively approaching others from different backgrounds could help, as well as the possibility of a Black parents' group. Many parents felt that PTAs could really help with enriching the school community. Sometimes parents had noticed racist and dismissive comments at the school gate that were being left unchallenged by staff and they wanted these incidents to be dealt with. They felt that just leaving them implied that the school was OK with these incidents.

Some parents suggested that bringing all parents in at the start of term, so everyone can see who the community is, would be a great start. During Covid this will be hard but they would like to hold on to some of these ideas.

When things go wrong

When things do go badly at school it is often a combination of factors, and race adds a significant and sometimes almost insurmountable barrier to finding solutions. Some parents talked about doing everything asked of them by the school and still feeling as though they were the problem. One parent made a very powerful point ***“meet us where we are, to work with us and have a better outcome.”*** A starting point can be to acknowledge and try and understand parents' experiences.

We all say that every child should be treated as an individual. Sometimes parents felt that this wasn't the case and their children were not seen as who they are. Some children from non-white ethnicities may be quieter, they said, their relationship with adults is not that of the classroom, and then they get less attention to who they really are and what their needs are.

Sometimes policies can start to have powerful and unintended negative effects. For example, in a school with a traffic light system for behaviour, where many of the children are white, the black children were in danger of finding an identity in negative behaviour.

What you can do with this for your school

This was the first time these parents had discussed race and equality with their children's schools. It is important to emphasise that the parents who spoke to us wanted to offer their thoughts as a tool for change and while the vast majority of them had great confidence in Hackney schools, they saw this forum as a way of making a leap of improvement.

We have two messages for schools after doing this work. First, listening to parents talk about race and equality will enrich your work and improve what your school does for everyone. We held on-line meetings and they were surprisingly intimate giving everyone an equal voice in a way that in person group meetings often do not. This work can support the good you are doing and help you to decide on sustainable change that is built on real knowledge and experience. Sharing this experience with other schools has been very empowering for the schools concerned. The Hackney Schools Group Board will continue to work with more schools to do this work, and we hope that many schools will do so independently as well.

Secondly, parents also told us how perceptive their children are, and how easily they can see when things are fair and when they are not. Returning to school during the pandemic will be a challenge for us all, and this makes it even more important to find natural and day to day mechanisms to hear from children through daily routines.

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