

In My Opinion

Understanding leads to tolerance

Education expert Angie Kotler explains why racial segregation in schools is such a problem.

“If all schools did this, we wouldn’t have riots in our city” These were the words of a 10-year-old boy of mixed-race origin, after his teacher had led a drama project with another primary school where all the children were from Asian backgrounds. Schools are mini societies where children learn to make sense of the world around them. And while the racial segregation of children in England’s inner cities often exists by default, the result of immigration patterns in the last century, it is a problem that we ignore at our peril.

Bradford is a case in point. Built on once-thriving textile industries that relied on waves of immigration, its inner city is struggling to reinvent itself today. Poverty characterises the mainly ethnic inner-city neighbourhoods, in contrast to the rings of prosperous suburbs that are predominantly white. Schools are similarly segregated; children from the mainstream white middle-class culture generally achieving better exam results than those from ethnic minority backgrounds (and poor white boys) living in the inner city.

Young people growing up in a society that appears to offer them no hope of attaining the desirable prizes of wealth and comfort are unlikely to accept this with good grace. Perhaps more worryingly, segregation perpetuates fear and ignorance between different cultures. We continually seek ways of raising educational achievement, but as exam results plateau nationally, we have to think radically. The evidence around academic achievement in segregated schools is ambiguous due to the many factors involved, but that is not really the point. What is more important is that, however we define it, education is never culturally neutral.

There is much talk about the need for creative and original thinkers in this post-modern age, but do we really understand what that means? Do we know how to develop this in our children? The model of learning that allows young people to develop in this way requires a context where they have real experiences from which they can start to form their own views and opinions. If young people grow up in segregated areas with only received wisdom, following the fear and ignorance of adults who have never had the experience or confidence to move out of their self-imposed separation, we risk perpetuating a situation that, in the current world climate, can only get worse. Only reality can explode the myths.

This year, 50 teachers in Bradford worked in pairs across the district to plan and deliver joint lessons that always included opportunities for creativity and often involved working with cultural venues within the district. They want to increase the achievement of all their pupils, but they have also discovered something less easy to define in current educational terms, but that often moves them to tears. Children who don’t normally speak in the classroom find their voice in a drama workshop, exploring themes of immigration and movement in all directions across the world. The look of amazement on 60 children’s faces, 30 of them white and 30 of them brown, when they realise that every single one of them has at least one friend or family member who has moved to another country speaks volumes. No explicit body of knowledge is being transmitted here; but opportunities for increased understanding are enormous. Children who don’t do well in sport enjoy team-building games with new friends from another school, where they are taught to trust and develop responsibility for themselves and others. Children learn street dance alongside their peers and produce artwork symbolising friendship, diversity unity and peace. Nine- and 10-year-

olds play games chat and appreciate that they all like pizza and ice cream; they all watch television and listen to pop music. They move tentatively towards new friendships and a culture that is shared. They start to realise that labels are inadequate and restricting. They go home and tell their parents that they have discovered something exciting and new. An eight-year-old Pakistani Muslim girl, after meeting a class of white children on one such project, said: *"I didn't think Christians would like me."* Another primary school pupil, Rachel, aged nine, wrote about linking schools' work: *"The project was a really good idea because it helps children socialise and it helps people realise that other people are no different to themselves."*

Children, given the space and the opportunities, start to make sense of the blend of messages and influences in their lives and, given time and respect, they start to articulate their understandings and their confusions. The teachers too are learning from the children, who find it easier to ask questions: *"Do you always eat curry? What do you do at the mosque/church/synagogue? What do you mean you don't believe in God?"* As adults, we are humbled and often embarrassed at our awkwardness, but we must cope with our discomfort, as the alternative is far more dangerous..

Angie Kotler is coordinator of the Schools Linking Project, one of several ways that Education Bradford is tackling the issue of segregation.