

Briefing paper: Race and immigration

Introduction

The arrival of significant minorities of non-white ethnic groups to the UK in the decades after the Second World War was a major driver of social change in certain areas of the country. Education (both primary and secondary) features prominently in the historiography of race and immigration in postwar Britain. The three areas of ethnic minority experience typically considered are housing, employment, and education. Commentators stress that of these three areas, education is the area where ethnic minority communities are likely to have had the most contact with the state and public services and thus the least autonomy and least success.

LEAs began to feel the pressure of immigration in the 1960s. Central government pursued an assimilationist policy from this point, which focused on dispersal (spreading ‘immigrant’ children out between schools to limit concentration), and led to practices such as bussing. By the late 1970s, following the establishment of the Commission for Racial Equality in 1976, policy moved towards an integrationist stance, leading to the dominance of multicultural educational thinking in the 1980s. Critics argue that this was rolled back in the 1990s by funding cuts and renewed anti-immigrant feeling. The consensus is that the British educational system systematically failed ethnic minority children, until at least the 1980s, and that most early educational policies were informed by institutional racism.

Most of the literature is framed around points of conflict between ‘immigrant’ communities and the British education system. The reoccurring points of tension throughout the period were school culture, English language, and religion. Outcomes and success were measured by underachievement and employment rates. There are very few instances of pupil’s and parent’s experiences brought to the fore, except in order to assess the consequences of policies. For example, Sarah Hackett’s study of the Muslim community in Newcastle draws on social survey material to examine achievement levels amongst different ethnic groups, otherwise focusing on LEA reports and policy documents. However, her case study does highlight the necessity of testing the national pattern against LEA-level developments. She finds Newcastle corresponds to the broader shift from assimilation to integration from the 1960s-1990s, but that the Muslim community fared very well because it was relatively small, which made it easier for the LEA to respond to the particular needs of its ethnic minority pupils (Hackett, 2016).

Statistics

It is difficult to obtain a national picture of the number of ethnic minority children in the education system because the collection of these statistics was a disputed topic between the Department of Education and Science (DES) and LEAs. From the 1960s DES defined an ‘immigrant pupil’ as a child born outside of Britain or a child born in Britain whose parents had lived in Britain for ten years or less. A figure frequently cited was that in January 1968



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there were 220,000 ‘immigrant pupils’ in maintained primary and secondary schools in England and Wales. The below table provides the numbers and overall percentages of ‘immigrant pupils’ in maintained schools in England and Wales in 1967 and 1968, according to this (disputed) DES formula (RR&I SC session 1968-9, volume 2, 1969, p. 170):

	Age 11	Age 12	Age 13	Age 14	Age 15	Age 16
1967	11808 2%	11636 2%	11285 1.9%	11192 1.9%	7694 2.1%	5395 1.9%
1968	14376 2.3%	14192 2.4%	14265 2.4%	14030 2.3%	10365 2.7%	7296 2.5%

In 1969 the Select Committee on Race Relations and Immigration called attention to the deficiency of this classification. Based on their LEA-level work, they argued that it led to a drastic under-estimation of the number of pupils facing the challenges associated with having parents of overseas heritage outside of the ‘ten year rule’. In 1973 the Select Committee found that there had been no changes to the collection of figures. Teachers and LEAs were increasingly unwilling to report according to the DES formula and therefore no clear picture of the multi-racial mix of school populations was being obtained. At the same time, Margaret Thatcher, then Secretary of State for Education, reported to the Select Committee that the figures were not anyway being used to allocate grants; a formula for urban deprivation was used to account for the pressure on resources associated with increased immigration. The Select Committee concluded that the collection of these statistics should cease altogether (RR&I SC session 1972-3, volume 1).

By the time The Swann Report (see below) was published in 1985 ‘no alternative arrangements had been made for the collection of ethnically-based educational statistics’, although the outcomes of a working group established in 1983 were being awaited (Swann Report, 1985, pp. 215-8). This mess reflected the ongoing complexity of defining of ‘immigrant pupils’ and their relationship to educational achievement and social deprivation.

The 1950s and 1960s

The 1948 British Nationality Act extended British citizenship status to Commonwealth subjects, recognising their rights to work and settle in the UK and allowing them to bring their families with them. This Act prompted Commonwealth migrants, firstly from the West Indies but increasingly from South Asia (Indian, Pakistan, and Bangladesh), to travel to the UK. They plugged the postwar labour shortage and fulfilled low-skilled roles in expanding public services, including the NHS. These rights were subsequently cut down by the 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act. But the first fifteen years of immigration did not have a significant impact on the education system, except in very specific areas. Michael Banton conducted a survey in Stepney between 1950 and 1952, finding only three children aged 12-15 of ‘Negro’ descent and fourteen of ‘Indo-Pakistani’ descent in the area. If ethnic minority men and women did have children in Britain in this period (and many didn’t, they lived as

singles seeking economic opportunities), they were of primary school age. Banton did find through anecdotal evidence that parents and pupils faced outright discrimination and were subjected to a racist, imperialist curriculum (Banton, 1955).

Throughout the early 1960s LEAs responded to their unique situations autonomously. The first sign that central government was recognising immigration as a ‘problem’ for the education system came with the release of Circular 7/65 to LEAs in 1965. This document, and the policies that followed, support the historiographical argument that there was a shift towards more ‘racist’ social policies in 1960s Britain. Circular 7/65 stressed that a joined-up approach between all public services was necessary. It looked at curriculum (‘Commonwealth Teaching’), English language provision, welfare checks, and teacher quotas. It promised that the Secretary of State for Education would consider requests for teacher quota adjustments based on individual appeals from LEAs.

The main policy of Circular 7/65 was dispersal, and there was a clear concern to appease white parents through this process. It was explained that up to 1/5 of immigrant children in a group could fit in with relative ease, but if the proportion went above 1/3 in either the school as a whole or in one class, serious strains arose. It was therefore ‘desirable that catchment areas of schools be arranged where possible to avoid undue concentrations of immigrant children’ (Circular 7/65, 1965). In June 1965 DES adopted a bussing policy nationally, which entailed transporting children on buses to schools away from their neighbourhoods to keep the number of ethnic minority pupils in single schools below the one third threshold. In Ealing bussing was in place from 1963-81. Brett Bebber’s recent article uses oral histories of the West London South Asian communities who experienced this policy. He found that the policy exposed pupils to racism and ostracization, but that some saw it as ‘part of life in England’, and that there was a lack of parental understanding of the policy (Bebber, 2015). Dispersal via bussing was the archetypal assimilationist educational policy, and it was imposed on ethnic minority communities from the top down and at the behest of white communities.

The 1965 Race Relations Act outlawed discrimination in public places (this act did not extend to Northern Ireland). In 1966 the Race Relations Board was established to consider complaints under this Act, and in 1968 it was extended to cover housing and employment. By the late 1960s, and in the climate of this legislation, pressure on schools in particular areas was intensifying. Hackett found that in Newcastle, ‘immigrant’ children were concentrated in a small number of schools where English language was being taught in specialised units. A lack of inter-ethnic friendships was also observed (Hackett, 2016). In November 1968 a Race Relations and Immigration Select Committee was constituted to review policies in relation to the 1968 Act. The Select Committee’s first report was The Problems of Coloured School Leavers. Published in 1969, the report continued to advocate dispersal, but there was also an evident concern that second-generation ‘immigrant’ children may become radicalised if their grievances were not addressed. The report recognised that the problems facing non-white school leavers mapped closely onto problems of urban deprivation, which were then



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deepened and inflected by race. The main issues identified within schools were: culture shock; a lack of contact with parents; a lack of English; careers guidance; late arrivals. Culture shock could include anything from weather, to school uniform, to disciplinary practices. But English language skills were the most visible and pressing concern, because they led to under-achievement and poor employment prospects.

Varying experiences were found between Pakistani, West Indian, and Sikh communities. For example, it was noted that West Indian mothers were more likely to work than Asian mothers and were therefore more difficult to engage. Sikhs in Southall were gaining qualifications and seeking skilled jobs but were facing discrimination, whilst Pakistani and West Indian juveniles in Huddersfield were rarely staying on in school beyond fifteen, and readily finding low-skilled work in the mills. The racialized elements of these employment patterns were patent. The report concluded that the responsibility to improve these areas rested largely with the white, indigenous majority, who needed to develop a 'deeper and fuller understanding of the problems of race relations' (RR&I SC session 1968-9, volume 1).

The 1970s

By the early 1970s secondary education was one of the key public services affected by immigration. Children in families who had arrived from the mid-1960s were reaching secondary-school age, and 'family reunion' migrants attached to earlier waves of South Asian migrants added to these numbers. The 1970s also saw the first generation of British-born South Asians. Through the 1970s consolidated, urban South Asian communities became more visible across the UK, as people settled in the same places because of employment demands and family ties (Fisher et al, 2007). Following the East African crisis of 1967-8, the early 1970s saw the arrival of thousands of East African Asians. They faced particular hostility from domestic Britons at this juncture, as Powellite sentiment swelled. Commonwealth immigration controls were tightened through the 1971 Immigration Act, which effectively ended 'primary' immigration. The early 1970s was also the peak of comprehensivization in the secondary school system. The 1970s are therefore a crucial focal point for considering the impact of immigration as social change on secondary education in the UK.

In 1973 the Race Relations and Immigration Select Committee published its fifth report, on the subject of Education (first - coloured school leavers; second - control of immigration; third - housing; fourth - police/immigrant relations). This report stressed even more strongly that the problems faced by ethnic minorities were clearly linked to problems of educational inequality in deprived urban communities. Consideration of the special plight of 'immigrant children' was, however, necessary, for fear of an 'explosion in race relations'. The overall tone of the report was foreboding. The report contained a substantial central chapter on the teaching of English, summarising the varied approaches to specialist English language provision being taken by different LEAs. The overall picture was diverse and haphazard; LEAs were adapting according to the needs of their communities. For example, in Haringey



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extra teachers and resources were provided in schools to avoid segregation, whilst in Leicester and Liverpool separate language centres had been established. Although the large numbers of South Asians entering the school system in the late 1960s had prompted an increase in English language teaching, the report warned that West Indian children (whose first language was English) often had ‘hidden’ language handicaps that would hold them back in examinations and the labour market. Where high numbers of secondary-age pupils had poor English language skills, more intensive training was needed. With its emphasis on English language skills as a barrier ethnic minority pupils, the 1973 Select Committee report maintained the assimilationist status quo, looking to the future as a period of ‘consolidation and considered expansion’ (RR&I SC session 1972-3, volume 1).

From the late 1960s a ‘respectable’ anti-immigrant discourse developed in Britain, which rehearsed a set of grievances about resources and the welfare state (Longpré, 2011), and which some have regarded as a (sub)-conscious response to the end of Empire (Schofield, 2013; Schwarz, 2011). This gave way to the ‘New Racism’ of the 1970s, which emphasized cultural rather than biological difference. This left South Asian (especially Muslim) communities alienated because their languages, customs, and religion stood in contrast to white British culture (Cesarani, 1996). On the other hand, the 1976 Race Relations Act established a Commission for Racial Equality which generated community relations projects (including education centres) up and down the country seeking to air and resolve racial tensions. This is sometimes referred to as the ‘race industry’ (Robinson et al, 2017). These twin developments have led historians to suggest that Britain became a ‘racialized’ society in the 1970s.

The 1980s and 1990s

In 1977 James Callaghan’s Labour government published a Green Paper entitled Education in Schools. It stated that Britain’s education system should reflect the multi-racial makeup of society. This indicated the abandoning of the assimilationist approach and the adoption of multiculturalism, which characterised educational policy towards ethnic minority pupils in the 1980s. Historical surveys suggest that a lot of grassroots activity to promote multiculturalism was already occurring in the early 1980s from within communities themselves. This was facilitated by channels of the ‘race industry’ and by the accumulated expertise of schools and LEAs. For example, South Asian mothers’ groups and educational initiatives in mosques teaching mother-tongue languages began to appear. But, as Bebber’s example of bussing in Ealing attests, attempts by ethnic minority communities to contest and change educational policies in their interests were rarely successful until the ‘official’ tide had turned in their favour towards multiculturalism (Bebber, 2015).

This turning came with the findings of the Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups, which had been established by recommendation of the Race Relations and Immigration Select Committee in the late 1970s. In 1981 the Committee published its interim report: West Indian Children in Our Schools (The Rampton



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Report). It found that West Indian children were clearly underachieving in relation to their peers. No single cause was identified, rather a network of widely differing attitudes and expectations on the part of teachers, education system, and parents (Rampton Report, 1981). Four years later, in 1985, its full report, Education for All (The Swann Report), was published. The Swann Report was nearly eight-hundred pages and covered an exhaustive range of issues, from religious instruction in assemblies, to the employment of ethnic minority teachers, to the specific needs of children from traveller communities. The report demonstrated extensive engagement with the theory and practice of racism. Overall, it promoted a vision of a multicultural education system that met the ‘needs of all pupils for life in a society that is multi-racial and culturally diverse’ (Swann Report, 1985). The Rampton and Swann Reports prompted academics to produce more studies of the education of different ethnic groups. They focused on explaining underachievement by assessing the cultural and religious factors that led to different aspirations and attainment, rather than assigning this to general urban deprivation or to ‘culture shock’, as had been the trend in the 1960s. Within the South Asian community, the pattern held that children with Indian and Sri Lankan heritage were typically more successful in schools than Muslim children from Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities, who lagged behind all other ethnic groups in attainment (Fisher et al, 2007).

The Major governments of the 1990s have come under fire for rolling back the progress of multicultural education and ignoring the issue of race, through funding cuts and returning to an emphasis on English language in schools (Fisher et al, 2007). This was also prefigured by the National Curriculum debates of the late 1980s and the 1988 Education Reform Act, which prioritised white British culture and Christian worship (Cesarani, 1996). Such reforms posed particular challenges for Muslim and Sikh communities, whose customs and traditions were more likely to come into conflict with the state requirements. Moreover, the needs of new communities of refugees and asylum seekers were lumped in with longer-established communities, sparking renewed racial tensions in some localities (Hackett, 2016).

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