

Meeting the challenge to promote racial harmony in Oldham schools

Rosemin Najmudin interviewed **Richard Gore** from the Oldham Ethnic Minorities Support Service about the range of initiatives the service is coordinating.

The Ethnic Minorities Support Service was established in 1992 within Oldham Council's Education and Cultural Services Department. The initiatives it co-ordinates were all established before the disturbances that made Oldham national and international news last summer. However, Richard acknowledges, the interest and participation of schools in the initiatives have increased significantly since the 'riots'.

About 5 years ago school linking projects were established between Oldham schools and schools in Sylhet in Bangladesh, and Mirpur in Pakistan (in the disputed area of Jammu and Kashmir). These areas were chosen to reflect the two largest ethnic minority communities living in Oldham. One consequence of the linking visits has been the development of a photo-pack resource on Bangladesh for Key Stage 2 (the upper end of primary education). The pack focuses on three Bangladeshi families from different socio-economic backgrounds, in order to reflect the diversity of Bangladesh. The aim is not just to raise awareness, but also to break down stereotypes related to the homogeneity of Bangladeshi people. The pack also asks questions such as: 'Why have people migrated and settled in Oldham?' and 'How did segregated communities become established in Oldham?'

Activities help pupils to explore the background of the people, the challenges that they face, and the background to the disturbances of last summer, and to look for desired solutions. The pack was published in consultation with a Sylhet-based organisation called Friends in Village Development Bangladesh. They also provided the photos and background information about the families to use within the pack.

The work is targeted at Oldham schools, but with an intention that the resources are used more widely. They are written so that they are appropriate for all settings from all-white schools to those which have mainly Asian heritage children and thus are suitable for other areas in Britain. The resources have been trialled in Oldham schools but also in Birmingham and Tower Hamlets in London, both of which have large populations of Bangladesh heritage children.

Another set of resources which came from the linking project is 'The Day in the Life Series', dual-text readers in English/Urdu and English/Bangla which focus on the Oldham Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities. Burnley Brow, an Oldham primary school with nearly 100% Bangladeshi heritage pupils has produced a high quality

Extended Visits Workbook, which contains a range of primary curriculum activities based on photographs taken in the Sylhet area of Bangladesh. This is intended to encourage children visiting their heritage countries to maintain their school work and to bring some of the learning from their visit back to Oldham.

Another important initiative, established 2 years ago, is inter-borough linking between schools with mainly Asian heritage pupils and schools with mainly white pupils. These links provide opportunities for pupils to meet and work on subject projects in Art, Drama and other curricular areas. Staff from various schools work and train together. This linking has proved exceptionally successful with seventeen pairs of twinned schools in November 2002. Funding has come from the Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant and the Children's Fund. This initiative was welcomed in the Oldham Independent Review 'Ritchie Report' which was written after the riots. Why does this work matter? The project provides opportunities for children to meet and establish friendships naturally. A feature on BBC Radio 4 interviewed a Bangladesh heritage child who said of his new friends in the link school: 'They like the same things we do, Harry Potter, rounders and playing on the computer!'

A resource is being written to target Citizenship Key Stage 3, again focusing on Oldham to explain the diversity there and to address some of the recommendations from the Ritchie Report. It will contain a programme of activities which will help young people to learn about the reasons different communities migrated and settled in Oldham and the responsibilities needed to be a good citizen in a culturally diverse city.

The Ethnic Minorities Support Service has developed Cultural and Race Awareness Training for adults such as education department staff. It is hoped that the course will be used throughout the council and aspects of it are used in schools. Every programme is evaluated and colleagues from the University of Manchester will act as external evaluators. A remaining challenge is working with parents. It is hoped that as part of Adult Education classes parents will also have the chance to participate in modified activities from the Cultural and Race Awareness Training. The Service has also developed an African Caribbean Education Project to support school-based projects which increase the ways in which the schools reflect aspects of African Caribbean culture and experience.

Finally, in the past work on race and culture were either carried out as ad hoc activities or on the periphery of most of the work in schools. Now they are on the mainstream agenda and part of good educational practice and feature centrally in the LEA's Education Development Plan. Let us hope that it does not take more riots for other authorities to address the issues of cultural diversity.

Rosemin Najmudin is a consultant, working to promote the work of black and ethnic minority organisations and people.

Richard Gore is the Oldham Ethnic Minorities Support Service Manager.

All resources are available from: EMSS, Centre for Professional Development, Rosary Road, Fitton Hill, Oldham, OL8 2QE.

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