Why Do The Mirrors Lie?

Gillian Willis, University of Chichester

Vini Lander, Professor of Education, Edgehill University

Introduction

Even in the twenty-first century racism still pervades our society. This article examines the phenomenon of racial stereotyping, its roots and ways in which White hegemony and other social factors subtly perpetuate its existence, and contribute to the link between legislation and practice in schools in England. This study was prompted by the words of a mixed heritage primary school child reflecting on racism and was an extended project undertaken by a final year ethnic minority student teacher. This article discusses background literature related to racism, outlines the research undertaken in one primary school and presents findings and their implications.

Stereotypes

Lane (2008: 16) defines 'stereotype' as the belief that the 'characteristics of one person are found in all members of the group to which they belong'. Stereotypes can manifest as either positive or negative associations of characteristics with a particular 'racial' group and can lead to positive or negative racial attitudes towards those groups (McKown and Strambler, 2009). Children's stereotypes usually originate from their social environment (Bigler and Libden, 2007) and are communicated through family, friends, media, teachers and educational curricula (Brown, 2008). 'Racial profiling' (Scipio and Lund, 2010) occurs where a particular profile is associated with all persons of a certain cultural or racial group.

If left unchallenged negative stereotyping can lead to the development of racist attitudes, which can later manifest as racist bullying and discrimination directed against minority groups (Scoffham, 2007; Lander, 2006) which in turn may affect student attendance and educational outcomes (James, 2012; Strand, 2007).

Race and Racism

'Race' is a socially constructed term (Garner, 2010) not supported by scientific evidence (Bolaffi *et al*, 2010). However, we live in a racialised society where many believe 'race' is linked to biological factors and implies difference between groups of people (Gaine, 2005; Leonardo, 2005). All people, including White people, are racialised. However, being racialised as 'White' carries with it notions of dominance and superiority (Bell, 2007) which perpetuate hegemony and social inequality of a society that presumes a 'White cultural norm' (Frankenberg, 1993).

The British Education system works to sustain inequality (Gillborn, 2008) and disadvantage some ethnic minority children (Pearce, 2005). In another study Lander (2006) argued racism continued to exclude, disadvantage and discriminate those who are perceived as 'different'. Ethnic minority pupils may develop fallacious beliefs about themselves and their potential as a result of falsely held stereotypes, a phenomenon referred to as 'stereotype threat' (McKown and Strambler, 2009). This 'stereotype threat' can impact significantly on children's life chances (Aronson *et al.,* 2013; Inzlicht and Schmader, 2012). All children need to be prepared for life in multi-ethnic Britain through anti-racist, multicultural education (Woolley, 2010) and given the tools needed to address racism in all its forms (Boutte *et al.,* 2011; Husband, 2011). However, research suggests only a weak link between legislation and practice (Dadzie, 2001) and racist bullying and negative stereotyping frequently go unchallenged in schools.

Teachers and 'Whiteness' at Work

According to the Department for Education (DfE, 2014) 88 per cent of teachers in Britain are White. Many come from middle class backgrounds and bring their own set of norms, experiences and assumptions which are transmitted via the education system. In addition, some teachers perceive children as being innocent and incapable of being racist (Pearce, 2005). Consequently children's stereotypes and prejudices remain unrecognised and racism may proliferate. Many teachers, however, claim to be 'racially neutral' (Yoon, 2012). By refuting the idea of 'White privilege' teachers do not examine how they disadvantage ethnic minority children (Solomon *et al.*, 2005). As a result, no attempt is made to unlearn practices that perpetuate the imbalance of opportunity in classrooms (Ofsted, 2012;

McIntosh, 1990) and teachers subtly collude to maintain an oppressive educational hegemony.

If White teachers are unaware of their 'advantage' in a predominantly White society and their participation in the maintenance of hegemony (King, 1991) it follows they need to be helped to recognise educational disadvantage and unlearn habitual practices in order to counter inequalities experienced by ethnic minority children.

Colour-Blindness

Many schools have adopted a colour-blind, 'no problem here' (Gaine, 2005) approach where colour is not acknowledged and everyone is ostensibly considered equal, arguing that because there are no or few ethnic minority children on roll, antiracist education is unnecessary. When schools assume this approach racism is not confronted (Gaine, 1995). Lander (2006) argues this approach denies the existence of people from ethnic minorities which undermines a person's sense of self and impacts negatively on self-concept and attainment. However, a colour-blind stance does not indicate negative racial stereotypes are not held. 'Race' is still relevant in racially isolated schools and it is crucial for children in predominantly White schools to understand racism and the insidious danger it represents (Knowles, 2006).

In some cases, teachers lack confidence in challenging racist incidents (Husband, 2011). Such reluctance may stem from unfamiliarity (Basit, 2009). However, once teachers recognise that their silence signals collusion, they may be more likely to challenge, rather than ignore racism (Pearce, 2005).

Methodology

An important tool in antiracist work is for teachers to understand 'Whiteness', to self-reflect and address their own ideological views in order to support educational opportunities for all children. Within this context our research explored the following questions:

1- How do children perceive people from ethnic minority communities?
2- Are these stereotypical perceptions and are these negative or positive stereotypes?

3-   Why might children hold these perceptions?

4-   How do teachers challenge these views?

The research took place in a school in the South of England in a ward identified as having high levels of deprivation. Of 174 pupils attending, 12 were ethnic minorities and spoke English as an Additional Language. Of the 34 on staff, 1 was from an ethnic minority.

11 children were selected through 'purposive sampling' to obtain the most useful data. The sample contained 3 ethnic minority and 3 White boys, and 2 ethnic and 3 White girls. One to one individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with each pupil. Findings and emerging themes formed the basis of staff questionnaires distributed to 9 teachers and 7 Teaching Assistants (TAs) to determine how stereotypes, if any, were being, or could be challenged.

Pupil interviews were conducted by a TA, in place of the researcher who was from an ethnic minority background (Maxwell, 2005) to encourage participants to openly express their opinions rather than risk offending the researcher. Each pupil was presented with a series of 6 photographs of children from different minority ethnic backgrounds and asked to sort these images based on a number of key features. Responses indicated pupils' perceptions of different ethnic groups and informed the follow-up semi-structured interviews with pupils and the design of the staff questionnaire (Koshy 2010). Staff questionnaires were used to explore teachers' views on how and where pupils acquire stereotypes, how they can be challenged, if barriers exist to challenging them, and how these might be overcome. A combination of multiple choice and open questions were used to collect qualitative and numerical data.

Research Findings

Theme 1 - *Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*' (Gilroy, 2002)

Of the 11 children interviewed, all cited skin colour as an indicator for sorting photographs of individuals to justify who was British. All assumed the White children (photographs C and F) were born in England (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Graph showing 11 children's perceptions of who was born in Britain.
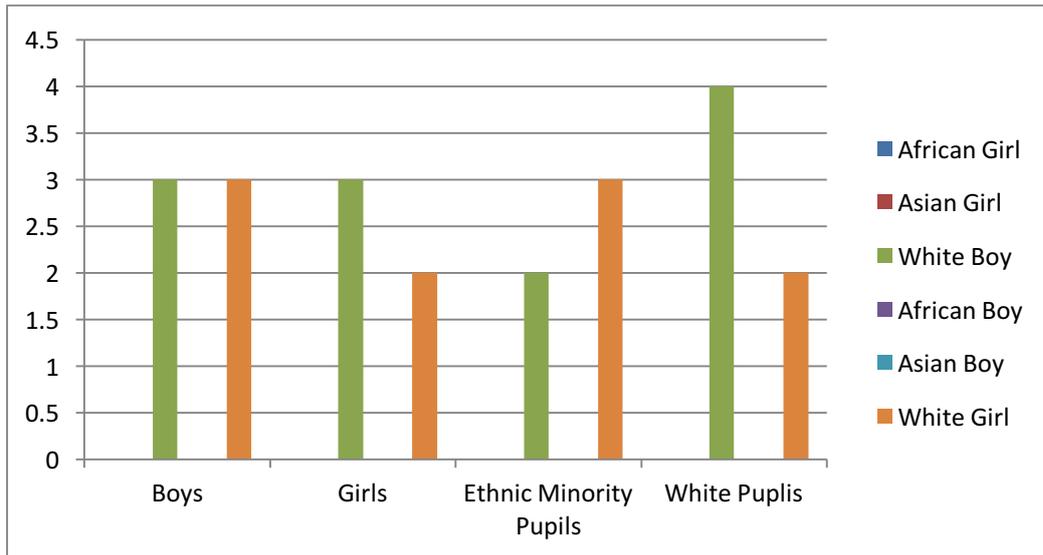
No pupils (boys or girls, White or ethnic minority) identified any pupils from ethnic minorities as having been born in Britain

Table 1: Examples of Pupil Responses to Justify Choice

Image	Pupil Response re Being Born in Britain
B: Asian Girl	*This girl was not born in England because she doesn't have white skin.'*
C: White Boy	*British people have white faces.'*
D: African Boy	*That one was born in Africa, he obviously was…he is the most black one*
E: Asian Boy	*He is sort of black, brownish black…people like that are not born in Britain*
F: White Girl	*British people look like her.*

These comments suggest an assumption that Black people cannot be British. Pauker, Ambady and Apfelbaum (2010) maintain that this 'race salience' involves more than an observation of skin colour provides the foundations for social categorization. The interviews suggested the children had internalised this categorisation, as all relied on skin colour to attribute characteristics to unfamiliar individuals.

Pupil responses did not correlate with staff questionnaires which revealed 5 out of 9 teachers and 5 out of 7 TAs believed children did not make assumptions about people based on skin colour. One teacher who asserted that children made assumptions based on skin colour, indicated '*when learning about different countries, children assume that all people who are Black/Chinese/Asian are from that country...*' suggesting children held stereotypes because of the manner in which some topics were taught which reinforced images of inferiority.

One child commented that his perceptions stemmed from home. When talking about the photo of the African girl he said, '*She looks like someone who might steal from you...my dad says don't go near someone like that...I don't like them'*. Although stereotypes can emanate from cultural information communicated through family, friends, media, teachers and educational curricula, school staff unanimously agreed 'family' was the most likely influence with respect to racial stereotyping.

Theme 2: Black is Negative and Inferior - Black People are Sad and Have Rubbish Jobs

Pupil interviews indicated assumptions that most ethnic minorities would hold 'menial' jobs (Figure 2). All 11 children indicated that White children (C and F) would hold 'noble' jobs such as pilots and teachers. In clear contrast, all associated 'cleaner' and 'criminal' with at least one ethnic minority photograph. Conversely, no children linked these jobs to the photos of White children. It appears that children associated 'racial' groups with specific stereotypical images, described by Scipio and Lund as 'racial profiling' (2010:8). It could also suggest that children perceive the superiority of Whiteness (Marx, 2006).

Figure 2: 11 Children's Opinions about Later Life Occupations
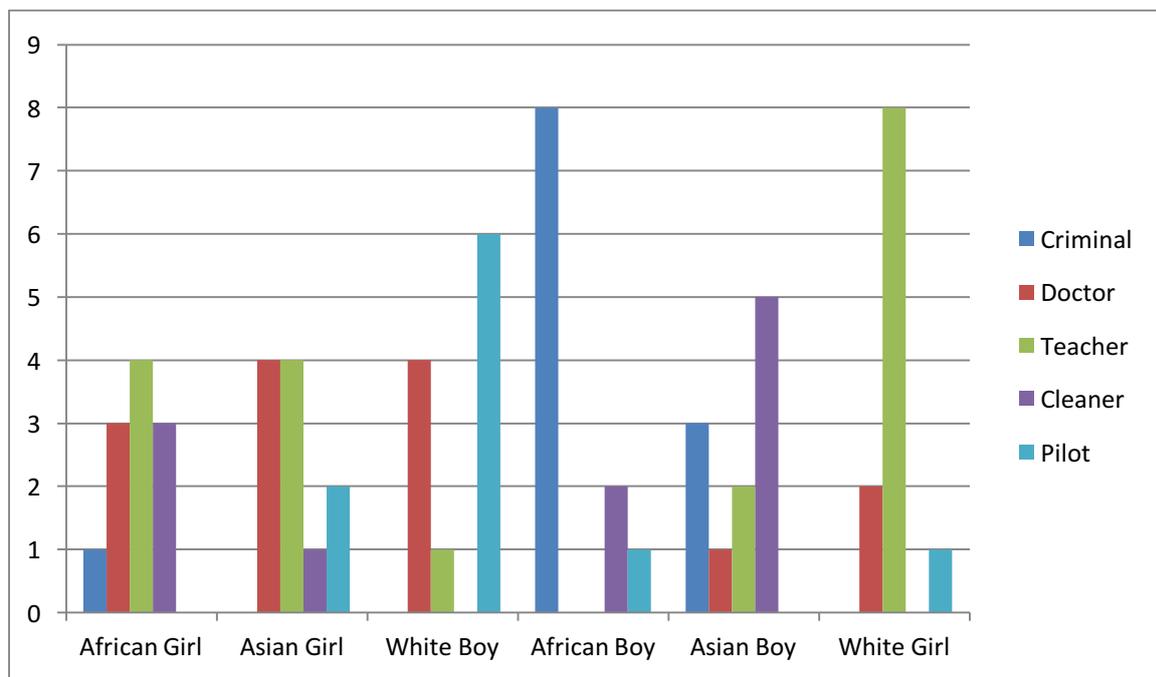
8 children predicted the African boy (D) would become a criminal, all 11explained he was poor and needed money for food. One ethnic minority child however, stated '*He might be a pilot...but I think he'll be a poor pilot.*' This comment suggests although the child believes Black people can achieve success, the stereotype that they are poor persists. This type of racial profiling encourages the association of certain cultural or racial groups with particular profiles, and appears to be evident in remarks made about ethnic minority children:

Table 2: Examples of Children's Opinions about Later Life Occupations

| Image	Pupil Response re Later Life Occupation
A: African Girl	*I've seen cleaners in Tesco who look like that* *I've seen a lot of doctors like her*
B: Asian Girl	*She doesn't have a home* *She looks like my doctor*
D: African Boy	*Black people are criminal* *He might steal stuff...he has that skin colour* *He hasn't got hair like us...that means he's poor....that's what Africans have.*

		His eyes say he'll be a criminal…they can just grab you… cross the road if you see them.' *African people can only be poor; I don't like him because his face is black.* *Criminal…at night it is black, he's black… it's a good disguise.*
E: Asian Boy		*He looks like a cleaner* *He looks poor and needs clothes*

Theme 3: Model Minorities and Stereotypes

3 children predicted the African girl would become a doctor, 4 suggested teacher. A similar response was gained with the Asian girl; 4 children predicted she would become a doctor, 2 suggested pilot, and 4 suggested teacher. This idea of model minorities (Gillborn, 2008) is commonly used to discredit the existence of racism and its associated dangers. One teacher alluded to this notion, '*You have to be African to win a gold medal;* another indicated *'children hold positive stereotypes - Indian children do better at school.'* The implication here is that educators may sometimes rely on stereotypes to influence attributional judgements of pupils (Reyna, 2008).

Children's comments indicated assumptions that White people are more likely to be affluent. The word 'rich' was **only** associated with White children (Figure 4). One child commented that the White boy (C) *'has a nice house, nice T.V.…has money.'*

Figure 3: 11 Children's Descriptions of Images
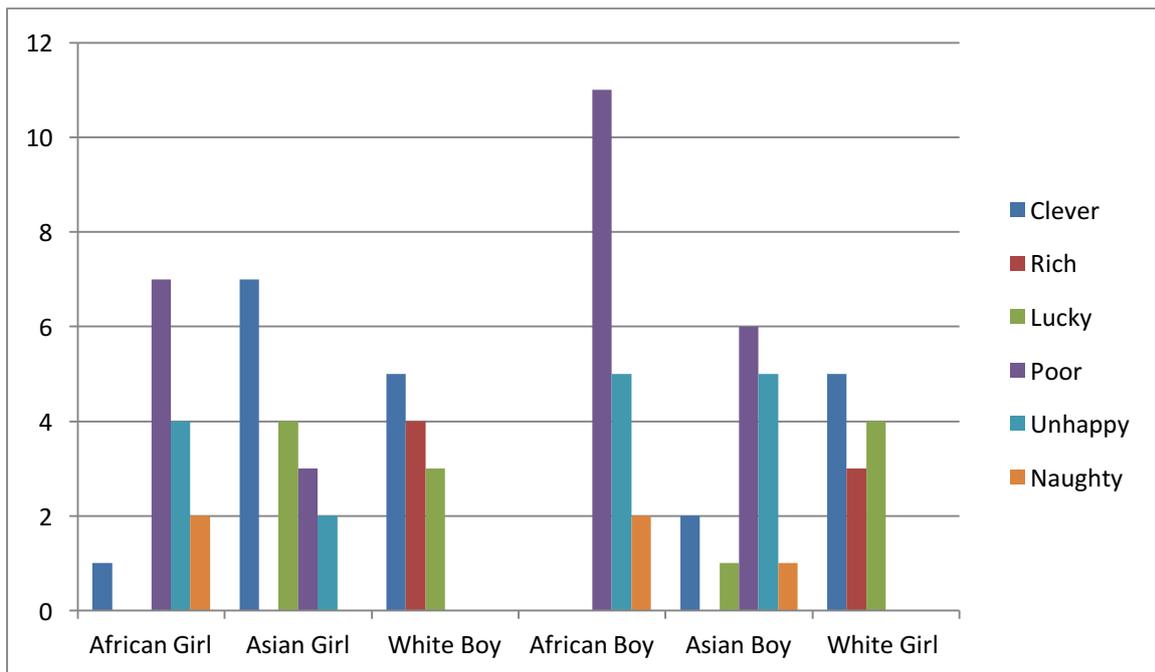
In contrast, no comments linked any of the ethnic minority photographs to financial affluence; instead, words like unhappy, poor and naughty were associated with them. This finding may be due to the fact that the children had been learning about a tribe in Africa prior to the start of the research. By possibly painting a picture of poverty, teachers may have consciously or unconsciously defined people of colour as different and inferior, leading to assumptions of White superiority.

Although children interviewed all held negative stereotypes about ethnic minority people, the majority of staff believed children would not hold these perceptions (Figure 5). One teacher indicated 'children in primary years seem to be more accepting of all minorities', another noted 'they mix with 'them' from an early age…they feel they are all equal.' According to Pearce (2005), teachers are generally unaware of stereotyping in schools, because of its subtle and complex process. Two teachers' comments appeared to indicate the belief that children were incapable of being racist (Milner, 1975):

'Curiosity in young children could be confused with racism.'

'I believe that children register a difference, but that's all it is, their perceptions will be positive, or they don't have any.'

It could be suggested therefore, that the staff could either possibly be in denial about racism in the school (Troyna, 1993), or they are simply trying to protect the children. This is an example of Whiteness at work as illustrated by Yoon (2012) and others.

Theme 5: Challenging Stereotypes.

6 staff members made no comment about challenging stereotypes. 2 teachers indicated 'unsure'. Whilst 2 teachers referred to using positive role models, one of the two indicated *'our school is not best at doing this.'* One teacher commented '*The issue needs to be spoken about amongst professionals when it's a problem*.' These comments seem to suggest that racial issues were not being recognised or dealt with appropriately in the school. 4 teachers and 3 TAs however, referred to *'values', 'politeness',* and *'showing love'* as strategies to challenge stereotypes. This supports Picower's (2009) view that in many cases, teachers deracialise the topic of race and racism without correcting the underlying assumptions. As such, stereotypes and assumptions remain unchallenged.

Table 3: Staff Views on Whether Children Hold Stereotypical Perceptions of Ethnic Minorities

	Yes	No	Uncertain
Teachers	2	4	1
Teaching Assistants	2	4	1

Four teachers indicated children do not hold stereotypical perceptions of ethnic minority children; however, 3 of them indicated these would be negative perceptions that inform racist incidents in school.

9 staff members initially claimed to be confident about challenging stereotypes (Table 5), One teacher stated *'I feel confident when challenging stereotypical views'* but later added, '*I am not sure how to challenge stereotypes without a wider range of backgrounds*.' It could be suggested that these contradictions represent 'Whiteness at work' (Yoon, 2012), which create conflict between statements and actions. As a result, an imbalance of opportunity may be perpetuated in classrooms, inadvertently disadvantaging ethnic minority children, and thereby preserving the hegemony (Leonardo and Porter, 2010) of the privileged.

Table 4: Staff opinions on challenging stereotypical perceptions

	Confident	Unsure
Teachers	8	1
Teaching Assistants	2	4

Table 5: Number of racist incidents occurring in the last 5 years

	0-3	4-5	6-15
Teachers	8	1	0
Teaching Assistants	7	0	0

Interestingly, although all pupils involved in the research held negative stereotypes of ethnic minority people, 15 out of 16 staff indicated a low level of racist incidents in the school. In fact, 4 teachers stated there were 'zero' cases. In this situation the absence of overt racism may be being used to deny the existence of racist incidents (Troyna, 1993).

Conclusion

This research has illustrated the critical importance of providing a curriculum that revolves around issues of diversity and equality, and the need to challenge stereotypes, myths and prejudices whenever encountered. In this predominantly White school children internalised skin colour as a basis for social categorization. These ideas reinforced children's stereotypical perceptions about Black people (Catling and Willy, 2009), and perpetuated superior patronising and hostile attitudes towards 'others' (Marx, 2006).

By denying and believing that children are incapable of being racist, teachers fail to challenge, address and counter racism in school. This could lead to long term prejudiced thinking, as White children remain unaware of cultural and racial inequalities, having not been afforded opportunities to critically examine the negative effects of racial stereotyping (Hays, Chang and Havice, 2008). It is crucial therefore, to openly discuss and support children, especially in majority White settings, to appreciate people who come from different backgrounds, religions and cultures (Woolley, 2010). Teachers need to be aware

that it is their duty to combat racism in all its forms. In addition, without realising their 'unconscious' propagation of stereotypes in the classroom, teachers subtly collude with racism and support White hegemony (Picower, 2009). Furthermore, because teachers' stereotypes may be reflected in teaching strategies and assessment of students this can affect ways pupils are treated, limit expectations and hinder children's development. Teachers need to recognise 'White privilege' and unlearn practices that perpetuate imbalance of opportunity so they can recognise and address the inequalities faced by ethnic minority children in the school (Moore, 2006).

According to Mukherjee 'Your racism has been your silence…Inaction or silence, to me means action. To me inaction means collusion' (1984: 6). It is hoped that this research will inspire practitioners to understand the influences of Whiteness (Marx, 2006), recognise and interrupt the vicious cycle of racism, and prepare all children to live harmoniously in a modern, multi-ethnic society, allowing each child, regardless of ethnicity, an equal chance to succeed.

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