

## **RESEARCHING DIVERSITY AND EQUALITY: THE NEED FOR A 'BIASED' APPROACH**

**Jean Conteh - Bradford College**

### ***Educational research as 'biased'***

*Objectivity is no more than the agreement of everybody in the room*

This thought-provoking remark is attributed to Edward Boyle, Minister of Education from 1962-1964 and Vice-Chancellor of Leeds University from 1970-81. I first heard it a few years ago. At the time, I was beginning to do some research to try to reveal the factors which helped bilingual children to succeed in mainstream classrooms. I wanted to track a small group of 'successful' children through their different learning experiences at Key Stage 2. I was worried that the approach I was contemplating, which was qualitative and ethnographic rather than quantitative and statistical, was too subjective and 'unscientific'. Boyle's remark encapsulated my concerns. It also partly answered the questions related to the problems of objectivity in classroom ethnography for me. It helped me to see that the problem was not one of seeking somehow to make the research methodology totally objective in order to present a watertight hypothesis which could claim to be the answer to the problem. The causes of ethnic minority underachievement are many and complex, and at times seemingly contradictory. The connections between them are similarly complex, difficult at times to see and analyse.

Gillborn and Gipps (1996) point out how qualitative approaches to research can help us to *understand the complex dynamics of teaching and learning*. They also reveal the factors, often not revealed by quantitative findings, which underpin success or failure (as demonstrated by test and exam results), in classroom situations. They can also help, in a non-judgemental way, to understand attitudes and sensitivities, especially important where complex and deeply personal issues such as racism are involved. They are, thus, appropriate for researching issues to do with the achievement of ethnic minority children in school. Gillborn and Gipps point out (pp. 57-58) how it is often the effects of perception and stereotype which mediate the success or failure of ethnic minority children in school, rather than any more tangible, quantifiable factors.

In my own research, I realised that each participant (which included children, their teachers and their parents) had their own experiences and viewpoints which influenced the situation in some way. They all had to be taken into account, if a meaningful outcome was to be achieved. The problem was to find a way to allow all of the voices of the participants in the process to be heard as clearly as possible. This would inevitably result, in one sense, in biased conclusions. But I realised that the recognition of those biases was actually very important. They showed the ways in which people as individuals were affected by the systems

imposed on them, rather than assuming that those people had no thoughts, feelings or responses of their own.

In the particular questions I was investigating, I was the 'researcher', but I was certainly not the 'expert'. I wanted to know more about ethnic minority experiences, but I am from the ethnic 'majority'. I wanted to know about underachievement in the education system, but I have always been relatively successful in that system, and so have my own children. I was beginning to see that my 'subjects' knew far more than I did about some of the questions I was beginning to ask. These questions were about the teachers' viewpoints on recent externally imposed changes in primary practice (such as the Literacy Hour), the significance of the children's home and community experiences, the parents' attitudes and their beliefs about what made a successful school. I began to see that the conventional, hierarchical relationships between 'researcher' and 'researched' were not helpful. If I really wanted to understand the issues I was researching, there needed to be a blurring of the distinction between the two, a recognition of the differing kinds of expertise owned by all involved.

### ***Educational research as a promoter of change***

*Just as there is no neutral education there is no neutral research ....*  
(Lather, 1986, p. 67)

Lather encourages us to see research as a tool *to criticise and change the status quo*. Wisely, she also cautions us to be wary of our enthusiasms. There has been great controversy among British ethnographers in recent years about issues of bias and neutrality in research, and about the rôle of research in contributing to social and policy change. Foster, Gomm and Hammersley (1993, pp. 34-39) argue for a position of value neutrality on the part of the researcher. They suggest that there is a separation in some sense of *truth* and *political or practical implications* (p. 39). Blair (1998, p. 14) suggests that to claim neutrality in carrying out educational research implies that it is like *umpiring a game of cricket*, leading to the formation of a *hegemonic research community*. You can become a member of the team once you learn the rules, but you do not question their validity. Hammersley (2000, pp. 134-141) argues strongly for an *analytic* approach to research, seeing its only goal as to push back the boundaries of knowledge, rather than a *critical* approach, where the questions and outcomes of research are geared towards social action.

My personal viewpoint is that, in relation to research in education, the *analytical* approach is unviable. Education has always been a political concern, and became very publicly so with Tony Blair's declaration of his top three priorities as '*education, education, education*' at the 1996 Labour Party conference. Questions of 'knowledge' are inextricably connected with power and control, and increasingly so when they are linked with questions of assessment, achievement and the 'problems' of ethnic minority learners. I believe that research in education

can contribute to change, though usually in the longer rather than the shorter term. As well as change at the level of policy, change will be expedited through increased knowledge among the 'powerless' of the external causes of their condition. The knowledge gained through research needs to be empowering to the community in which the research is based, and not just to the individual researcher or to the established authorities: perhaps this is what Hymes (1981) meant in his assertion that ethnography supports a *democratic way of life*. Jordan and Yeoman (1995) also support this line of thinking, reminding us of the antecedents of ethnography in the anthropology of colonial times with all its constructs and connotations of inequality. They argue for the need for a '*critical ethnography*', which aims to seek out the tensions and conflicts in a situation of inequality.

### ***Promoting research into diversity and equality***

My own research has been completed, at least for now, and presented as a PhD thesis (Conteh, 2001a). Sections have also been published in articles (Conteh, 2000, 2001b). These contribute in a small way to the growing body of research from Britain, Europe and USA which reveals the complexity and inter-connectedness of factors which promote the success in school of children from diverse ethnic backgrounds. A significant group of factors involves the relationships between teacher and learner and the ways in which each needs to value and negotiate the cultural worlds of the other in order to co-construct positive and supportive cultures of teaching and learning.

This indicates the need for more teachers who share the cultural backgrounds of their learners, and who can also contribute to all teachers' understandings of different cultures and languages. This point has been recognised for some time. There is currently great official concern in Britain about the low numbers of teachers from ethnically diverse backgrounds within the mainstream system. At a national level, indeed, there is extensive practical support for strategies to recruit and retain such teachers. At the same time, there is little qualitative evidence of the personal and professional viewpoints of the teachers themselves, and of the ways generally in which teachers can contribute to the success of pupils who may not share the same cultural and language backgrounds. There is a vital need for more researchers who are themselves members of different cultural groups, to widen our understanding of these issues.

With this in mind, an INSET module entitled *Researching Diversity and Equality* has been initiated as part of Bradford College's MEd programme. This module aims to encourage students to develop their understandings of ways in which both internal and external factors to the classroom can contribute to the academic success of children in ethnically diverse learning contexts. These are very wide-ranging, and can include:

- cultural and language factors;
- the rôles and influences of teachers and parents;
- influences from the immediate community;
- wider national and international factors.

The qualitative, ethnographic approach to researching issues of ‘success in diversity’ which the module introduces, while relatively innovative, is well referenced in the literature. The module provides participants with the opportunity to employ these approaches in order to research issues in their own teaching and learning contexts. In doing so, it helps to build their confidence and awareness of their own expertise and power to influence and effect the kind of change which will promote genuinely multicultural teaching and learning.

Issues of equal opportunities, particularly those related to cultural and language diversity – and, indeed, gender – are central to the content of the module. In order to elicit active consideration of these issues, teaching and learning approaches used seek to reinforce messages which underpin equality, such as the critical evaluation of hierarchical and divisive notions, the collaborative design of questions and interrogation of methodological approaches. There is also input from graduates of the MEd programme who have successfully completed projects using ethnographic approaches. The aim is to create a *community with shared exemplars through which we confirm and validate our collective work* (Mishler, 1990, p. 423). Such a research community will gain strength and power from within. It will begin to identify ways in which we can achieve success through (and not despite) diversity within our education system.

contact Jean Conteh (email [j.conteh@bilk.ac.uk](mailto:j.conteh@bilk.ac.uk)).

## REFERENCES

- Blair, M.** (1998) *The myth of neutrality in educational research* in: Connolly, P. and Troyna, B. (eds.) *Researching racism in education: policy, theory and practice* (Buckingham, Open University Press) pp. 12-20
- Conteh, J.** (2000) *Multilingual classrooms, standards and quality: three children and a lot of bouncing balls* *Language and Education*, 14:1, pp. 1-14
- Conteh, J.** (2001a) *Success in Diversity: Culture, Knowledge and Learning in Ethnically Diverse Classrooms* unpublished PhD thesis, Goldsmith’s College, University of London
- Conteh, J.** (2001b) *The negotiation of difference: the meanings of success in ethnically diverse classrooms*, in Walford, G. (ed.) *Ethnography and education policy; Studies in Educational Ethnography*, vol. 4, pp. 71-96 (Jai Press/Elsevier Science)
- Foster, P., Gomm., R. and Hammersley, M.** (1996) *Constructing educational failure* (London, Falmer)

**Gillborn, D. and Gipps, C.** (1996) *Recent research on the achievement of ethnic minority pupils* (OFSTED, London, HMSO)

**Hammersley, M.** (2000) *Taking sides in social research: essays on partnership and bias* (London, Routledge)

**Hymes, D.H.** (1981) *Ethnographic monitoring* in: Trueba, H.T., Guthrie, G.P. and Au, K.H. (eds.) *Culture and the bilingual classroom: studies in classroom ethnography* (Rowley, Mass., Newbury House) pp. 56-68

**Jordan, S. and Yeomans, D.** (1995) Critical ethnography: problems in contemporary theory and practice *British journal of sociology of education*, 16:3, pp. 389-408

**Lather, P.** (1986) Issues of validity in openly ideological research: between a rock and a soft place *Interchange*, 17:4, pp. 63-84

**Mishler, E.G.** (1990) Validation in inquiry-guided research: the rôle of exemplars in narrative studies *Harvard educational review*, 60:4, pp. 415-442