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Experiences of Minority Ethnic Young People in Scotland: Issues for Education

Moray House School of Education Election Briefings

Education from early years to 18
Research and Practice Contributing to Policy

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Experience of Minority Ethnic Young People in Scotland: Issues for Education

The largest qualitative study of the everyday experiences of minority ethnic young people in Scotland (Hopkins et al 2015) found that those who are not white or do not speak with a Scottish accent are still perceived as foreign, not Scottish and 'other'. Schools need to play a larger role in educating against misrecognition and helping young people respond to incidents of racism and various forms of discrimination.

Key points for consideration

- Many young people in the study were highly positive about diversity in Scotland and valued schools as safe places to study and develop friendships. However, the young people also described in different ways how they were made to feel as though they did not belong on the basis of accent, colour, faith, dress, nationality and ethnicity.
- Young people talked about new forms of racism based on faith (being Muslim), on anti-immigration attitudes and on religious intolerance. Young people were concerned with the subtle experiences of racism that happened on a daily basis in public spaces e.g. in a taxi, at the bus stop, at the gym, in city centres.
- Young people tended to dismiss prejudices and experiences of racism as something that 'just happens'. They often described their own coping strategies. However, many wanted more opportunities to talk about everyday racism.
- The lowering of the voting age to 16 was a catalyst for young people to become more engaged in politics. It is now important for secondary schools to consider the implications of this in terms of improving political literacy.

Briefing

The data from this paper is drawn from a study of the experiences of ethnic and religious minority ethnic young people (aged 12-25) in Scotland. The study was conducted by Newcastle, Edinburgh and St Andrews Universities from 2013-2015 and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). ¹The study explored the everyday life experiences of 382 young people growing up in urban, suburban and rural Scotland. The young people included six different groups: Muslims; Non-Muslim South Asians; Asylum-seekers and refugees; International students; Central and Eastern European migrants; and White Scottish young people.

National Identity and Scottishness

Young people identified with Scotland and 'Scottishness' irrespective of their ethnic and religious heritage. However, young people also said that unfortunately Scottishness was still equated with Whiteness. For example, Renuka remarked:

..the way I speak and the way I act, I think is Scottish, but it is my skin colour... people think that I am not Scottish. (female, 16018, Scottish Indian, Sikh, Glasgow)

¹ The researchers were Professor Peter Hopkins (Newcastle), Dr Katherine Botterill (Newcastle), Dr Gurchathen Sanghera (St. Andrews) and Dr Rowena Arshad, (Edinburgh).

While national identity was felt to be important, many young people recognized and expressed the various identities (faith, ethnicity, cultural heritage) they felt had shaped their experiences.

Dave suggests:

I'm proud to be Scottish, but that doesn't define you (male, 22-25. White Scottish, Christian, Perth and Kinross)

Racism and Discrimination

Young people wanted to have opportunities to talk about racism and referred to racist incidences on the basis of accent, skin colour, faith, dress, nationality and ethnicity. Other research (Hicks et al 2011; Arshad et al 2005) has found that teachers report a lack of confidence in discussing these issues and many avoid dealing with low level racism and racial prejudice for fear of getting it wrong or offending. Young people talked about new expressions of racism based on Islamophobia, anti-immigration attitudes and religious intolerance. Young people had developed their own coping strategies such as fending off ignorant comments with humour, refusing to take offence or trying to educate the person making the comments. Some simply avoided placing themselves in unfamiliar social spaces and instead withdrew from open interactions. A greater worry was how young people appeared to dismiss experiences of racism as something that 'just happens'.

Being able to vote at 16

The study found that an overwhelming number of young people who could vote in the Referendum of 2014 did so. The lowering of the voting age in the Independence Referendum was a catalyst for some young people to consider political issues. However, while young people were engaged in politics through various media platforms, they were not always clear on how to access politics and influence change. Many were interested in issue-based politics (e.g. human rights) and less interested in traditional routes such as membership of political parties. The study found that young people wanted to be involved and to have opportunities to determine and shape their future.

Conclusions / recommendations

- Schools should consider how they could do more to educate against misrecognition and media negativity about migration.
- Continued professional development needs to be offered to teachers to raise confidence about addressing controversial, difficult and sensitive issues with pupils.
- Teachers (the majority from non-minority backgrounds) need to better understand the everyday street experiences of minority young people, particularly if these experiences disrupt their confidence to be effective learners.
- The Scottish teaching workforce need to better reflect the increasingly multicultural, multilingual and faith diversities of the pupil population.
- The senior phase of secondary schooling needs to offer more opportunities for young people to develop political literacy.

References

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Further information

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