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**AM I DIFFERENT?
SOCIAL IDENTITY, DIFFERENCE,
EXCLUSION, AND THE (UN)HAPPINESS OF
THE ‘BLACK AND MINORITY ETHNIC’
CHILD**

Hadiza Kere Abdulrahman, PhD

Bishop Grosseteste University, UK

ABSTRACT

The demographic shift in Britain over recent years is more apparent in our schools than anywhere else; with changes in racial, cultural, religious and linguistic diversity all contributing to making these schools different from what they used to be. The way that educators (in particular) respond to these changes can have significant impact on the happiness and well-being of children from these diverse backgrounds. A positive or negative response can affect the happiness, self-esteem and academic success of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) children. It is often said that childhood is the happiest time of our lives, with happiness conceptualised as a relatively stable positive affective trait that underscores life satisfaction and subjective well-being. Children’s well-being and happiness is thus an increasingly important area of interest in practice, and especially for policy and research, with governments becoming more interested in monitoring and measuring children’s well-being to inform policy.

A RACIAL, CULTURAL, RELIGIOUS AND LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY

A commitment to promoting the well-being of all children is embedded in the stated aims of many government departments. Schools especially are on the forefront of this as important sites for promoting the well-being and happiness of all children and young people, and as really important places for building great interpersonal relationships. Given this commitment and Britain's increasing racial, cultural, religious and linguistic diversity, how then can UK schools ensure that they recognise and address the well-being needs of children from Minority Ethnic backgrounds? It is this question that brings us to the rationale for this chapter which explores the happiness and well-being of Black and Minority Ethnic children within schools, as well as the different issues that may affect them, and how to begin to think through these in practice.

The way that educators respond to these changes can have significant impact on the happiness and well-being of children from these diverse backgrounds

The aim of this chapter is to cast important light on lessons for educators, with strategies to be able to recognise and respond to some challenges facing Minority Ethnic children; and also in order to improve the ways such children experience and attain social well-being within schools. The chapter is therefore an exploration of a range of issues such as prejudice, racist bullying on the playground, wider societal increase in racism and hate crimes, the feelings of exclusion these foster; and how these transmit into BME children's worlds and their potential impact on feelings of belongingness and subjective well-being. The exploration also includes the ways that these issues can contribute to children's constructions of social identities and feelings of sameness or difference. Racial prejudice (an unjustified feeling of dislike towards ethnic minority groups) in particular, has long been a significant social problem in ethnically diverse countries and

while the presence of ethnic prejudice is problematic in any sector of the community, the possibility that it may be widespread among school-age children is of particular concern. Nesdale (2004) argued that ethnic prejudice has the potential to lead to short- and long-term psychological and physical harm to young members of minority groups.

The chapter is structured such that the introduction starts with a general recognition of the changing nature of British society, its increasing diversity, and the possible effects of this on children who come from minority cultures living within a majority culture. The aim is to understand how being viewed and treated as a minority and as different has an effect on children's social relationships within schools, and how it subsequently impacts on their happiness and well-being. The ways in which social identities and social relationships affect children's happiness is thus looked at starting with the next section which focuses on differences conceptualised through social identity. The section that follows looks at how these differences can lead to prejudice, racist bullying and subsequent exclusion from the in-group for children from minority ethnic backgrounds. The school as the setting for the actualisation of this interplay between difference, prejudice and exclusion is also considered, with a view to understanding its potential role both in reproducing and interrupting these relationship dynamics. In the next section the interplay between social exclusion due to differences, and its effect on the well-being of minority ethnic children is carefully considered through a social identity lens.

Why Am I Different? Exclusion Based on Social Identity and the Happiness of 'Black and Minority Ethnic' (BME) Children

The term 'Black and Minority Ethnic (BME)' is often used to refer to groups of people who are visibly different in terms of skin colour, cultures, traditions and/or religions. BME as a term is therefore used for all 'non-white' people and has been adopted by the UK government for statistical purposes according to Wilkins and Lall (2011), who also stated that terminology in regard of race and ethnicity is a complex matter and that the

adoption of 'Black and Minority Ethnic' as a term is used on grounds of convenience. Thus its adoption does not imply acceptance of it as a conceptually valid definition. This is a sentiment that is shared here as well, the term is being used in this paper with an awareness of all its contestations and limitations, and for lack of a better alternative. Thinking in relation to the use of the term, it is important to bear in mind that ethnic labels have complex meanings in British society. Dyson and Gallannaugh (2008) argued that they intersect and interact with other markers of identity in complex ways, and that ethnicity in England is really a matter of lived identity. Ethnicity is thus, best understood as a dynamic, constantly evolving property of both individual identity and group organisation (Nagel, 1994). It is a variable and will be dependent on a range of other factors.

The term 'Black and Minority Ethnic' as adopted in this chapter is therefore used within the explained context above, to mean children from other cultures who exist within a majority culture, where they can face prejudice and social exclusion on the basis of their perceived differences. Exploring some of the possible causes of unhappiness for BME children in the UK, especially within an inclusion framework, it is important to note that constructions of minority groups are located within a context which defines what it means to be British (for example), and these can come with lots of assumptions around several issues including skin colour, lifestyle, language and even religious beliefs, with differences constructed as a result of these assumptions. Experiences of prejudice among and between children can often mirror those of the wider society's values and norms, especially as these children seek the tools and ways of constructing their own social identities. Wider societal discussions about cultural differences, national identities, 'British values', Brexit, amongst other things, can become real and manifest on the playground and in schools for many BME children. All these can affect not only how these children view themselves, but also how they are viewed by others. Especially as according to Konstantoni (2012), logically, similarity evokes differentiation and inclusion entails exclusion.

Experiences of prejudice among and between children can often mirror those of the wider society's values and norms, especially as these children seek the tools and ways of constructing their own social identities

When a child is enrolled at school variables such as friends, social inclusion and educational achievement play important roles in the child's life (Nguyen, 2011) and well-being. And given that children spend a large part of their day in school, it makes sense that the school becomes an important arena for understanding what goes on with the child, how that particular setting may impact on their sense of identity and self and how it affects their happiness. Children's peer relationships, friendships and social identities form an important domain where their happiness and well-being can be explored. Social inclusion especially, according to Nguyen (2011) has been mentioned as one of the main determinants of happiness. A sense of community, belonging and feelings of exclusion can all have a huge effect on the happiness and well-being of BME children.

A general understanding of common or basic factors universal to every child's happiness irrespective of ethnicity - as has been shown in all the other chapters of this book - is a very useful starting point, moving from then on to explore the added effects of Ethnic Minority status on well-being and happiness, especially as it intersects with these other common and basic factors such as communication issues and special needs. Happiness, well-being and subjective well-being are all used interchangeably in this chapter and sometimes together. Well-being in particular, is a term that can be understood and represented in different ways and there is no agreed definition for the term as it tends to be conceptualised differently in different disciplinary areas. Our sense of well-being and the strategies deployed to attain it will be socially and culturally determined. Therefore, its understanding will require paying attention to the societal preconditions perceived necessary to achieve it, as well as well as the socio-cultural factors shaping these perceptions (McGregor, 2006). A social identity framework in particular supports linkages between ethnic identity, race and well-being. Good social relationships especially, are some of the greatest contributors to

happiness in children, while social belonging – a sense of having positive relationships with others – is a fundamental human need, and social isolation not only harms subjective well-being but also intellectual achievement.

Having a friend or being part of a group is very important to children, with their interdependent relationships being evident by the fact that most children ask each other questions such as ‘*are you still my friend*’ or ‘*am I your friend?*’ The fear of ‘not belonging’ or of ‘being excluded’ creates an interdependent relationship between children. This can be understood when placed within the dynamics of children’s relationships with peers, and the feelings of exclusion and inclusion that can develop especially as children navigate sameness, difference and belongingness.

Children’s peer relationships, friendships and social identities form an important domain where their happiness and well-being can be explored.

When children are seen and labelled as different, this has an impact on the quality of their relationships with their peers, and subsequently on their happiness. If Black and Minority Ethnic children’s happiness and subjective well-being is therefore looked at through a lens of social identity and notions of exclusion and (un)belonging, it would deepen the understanding of some of the issues that affect Black and Minority Ethnic children’s general well-being in schools.

LOOKING MORE CLOSELY AT SOCIAL IDENTITY

Social identity theory is not new but it is still highly relevant because of its potential to deepen our understandings of the connections between identification, race (and ethnicity), and effects on well-being. It was first developed in the 1970s and it is an approach which places emphasis on the

awareness of social structures in accounting for ethnic prejudice. Nesdale (2004) adapted it to incorporate understandings of theorising about children into this model, and he proposed an adaptation of the model which recognised changes in children's intergroup behaviour. He argued that children adopt a particular attitude because it fits in with their views of themselves as belonging to a social group with a particular set of attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. He added that children who display ethnic prejudice pass through four sequential developmental phases – undifferentiated, ethnic awareness, ethnic preference and ethnic prejudice. A brief description of the stages is given as follows:

Phase 1: Undifferentiated – which states that prior to the ages of 2 and 3, racial cues are typically salient to young children. That children respond to environmental objects (including unfamiliar people) on a largely random basis in terms of what catches their attention.

Phase 2: Ethnic Awareness – which begins to emerge at around the age of 3 and particularly for those who live in multi-racial societies. Children enter an environment in which key social categories (like race and gender) are already specified, and the nature of intergroup relationships established. Crucially here, is the child's ethnic self-identification - the realisation that they belong to a particular group.

Phase 3: Ethnic Preference – Self-identification as a member of the dominant group comprises an important piece of a child's identity jigsaw, the child learns that they belong to or are members of a particular (ethnic) group. The effect of this is a focus on the 'in-group' (those with whom you share similarities), rather than the 'out-group'; and on similarity rather than difference. This though, is more of a bias rather than prejudice against the other group.

Phase 4: Ethnic Prejudice – which entails a change from mere preference, so rather than just a focus on the in-group and its positive differentiation and similarities, prejudice implies a focus on the out-

group members and actually disliking or reproducing negative ‘facts’ about ethnic minorities. It means discriminating against minority group member whenever the occasion arises.

This start of an awareness of difference as observed in phase 4, can also be the beginning of exclusion of children perceived as being different, so negative differentiation as opposed to positive differentiation, differences informed heavily by stereotypes made in the wider society. The general argument here is that, the tendency for children to develop ethnic prejudice will increase as they grow older and due to a range of factors. Social structures, contexts and external influences affect children’s friendships and relationships; and as competition, tension and conflict increase in the wider society between members of the dominant and ethnic minority groups, so will prejudice. Prejudice feeds into racist bullying and exclusion on the playground, and thus increases feelings of ‘unbelonging’ and unhappiness on the part of Minority Ethnic children, as is explored in the next section.

‘They Won’t Play with Me’: Feelings of Exclusion amongst BME Children and Its Effects on Happiness and Well-Being

The reason that the social identity model is helpful for considering how minority children can experience unhappiness (due to exclusion because of their identity) is because, it recognises the considerable influence exerted by social factors on the acquisition of children’s prejudices. Social identities can affect children’s well-being and happiness through their interaction with other children, with their sense of belonging brought into question due to creation of doubt as to whether one will be accepted or rejected in a social environment. This can prove acute if this rejection is based on one’s negatively stereotyped social identity. Take the following scenario for instance.

Scenario 1

Pambi, is a 7-year-old black boy of African descent, who felt that no one in his class wanted to be his friend. Pambi is one of only a handful of black children in his small school, set in a majority White part of England.

It became apparent the degree of his exclusion by his peers when he was one of two children not invited to a birthday party by his classmate – the other child not invited has some disabilities and works with a Teaching Assistant.

*This lack of invitation caused Pambi a great deal of distress and unhappiness, especially when the invited children kept talking about the party on the playground. Leading him to ask his mum the question:
'Why won't they play me with me, why am I different?'*

What is clear from this scenario is how something as seemingly innocuous (to many) as being excluded from a birthday party by a classmate has caused Pambi a lot of distress and unhappiness, and highlighted to him how unpopular he was to the rest of his classmates. This unpopularity was further reinforced on the playground through the various social relationship and friendship dynamics that children create, which left Pambi feeling like an outsider.

The role of social relations on happiness alludes to how negative experiences with peers including a lack of popularity, can impact on the development of friendships and how that may lead to loneliness and even depression - positive social relationships like visiting friends or feeling popular with peers may therefore be associated with increased happiness, and negative social experience (feeling left out) may be associated with decreased happiness. Being accepted, included, or welcomed also leads to positive emotions such as happiness, elation, contentment and calm says Osterman (2000), while the feeling of rejection or exclusion can cause a child to experience intense negative feelings of anxiety, depression and grief.

The need for relatedness is the need to experience a sense of belonging, or to feel accepted as part of a community, as this causes a child to feel securely connected with others in the school environment, and to experience themselves as worthy of love and respect amongst their peers. For Black and Minority Ethnic children, simply belonging to an ethnic group that faces discrimination and prejudice and one that is stereotyped can foster a sense of uncertainty, with feelings of self-doubt and anxiety especially when it comes to developing and maintaining social relationships in school settings. This uncertainty about whether they belong, according to Walton and Cohen (2011), can often undermine minority students' health and mental well-being.

Positive social relationships like visiting friends or feeling popular with peers may be associated with increased happiness, when negative social experience (feeling left out) may be associated with decreased anxiety and feelings of unhappiness

In *The Independent*, a UK newspaper, it was recently reported that children are being racially abused every hour in the UK, and that research has suggested a general rise in hate crime (Dearden, 2019). Who went on to add that the NSPCC (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children), a children's charity, said figures have rocketed by a fifth in the past three years, mirroring a rise in hate crimes across all age groups, and that officials have linked this to Brexit and terror attacks. The article reported that a 10-year-old black girl had said that school bullies often told her she had '*dirty skin*' and she had lost friends, the girl added that

'I was born in the UK but bullies tell me to go back to my country, I've tried to make my face whiter before using make up so I can fit in. I just want to enjoy going to school'.

An 11-year-old pupil who reported that she was called '*Yellow*' because of her Chinese origin, said:

‘I hate the way I look so much, I’ve tried to change the way I look by using eyeliner so I fit in more, I don’t want to tell my parents because I think it will upset them’.

John Cameron, the head of Childline, again in *The Independent* newspaper (Dearden, 2019) said that ‘*Childhood bullying of this nature can cause long-term emotional harm to children*’. Name-calling can be particularly harmful to BME children as it feeds into the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion especially on the playground and thus has a deep impact on a child’s subjective well-being.

School, peer and teacher acceptance are very important sources of support and the school has been found to be even more important in students’ experience of emotional distress than the family context according to Osterman (2000). Belongingness, sense of community, sense of school or classroom membership, support and acceptance are all associated with important psychological processes, and children who experience a sense of relatedness are known to have a stronger supply of inner resources. This therefore makes the school really important in addressing the issues of threats to the happiness and well-being of Black and Minority ethnic children. Discovering what schools can do becomes even more vital as the next section reveals.

THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL: MOVING FROM POLICY RHETORIC TO PRACTICE

Our schools are a microcosm of the wider society and therefore not immune to what goes on in the outside world. In fact, they act as mirrors to happenings in the outside world. This makes them really vital for the understanding of the well-being of Minority Ethnic children. Happiness really should be top of the agenda for all schools because children learn best when they are happy. Conditions in the classroom and in school can affect

how Minority Ethnic children feel about themselves and subsequently their feelings of happiness and subjective well-being. It can also affect how they engage with others and their general achievement. Black and Minority Ethnic children who experience acceptance from their peers and teachers are more likely to be highly motivated, engaged in learning and to feel happier within themselves.

Our individual sense of acceptance therefore, can have a huge impact on our emotions and the quality of our relationship with others. For BME children to feel secure in their identity and in who they are, is deeply connected with not just how they view themselves but also how they are viewed by their wider community, often starting with the school. Minority Ethnic children's happiness and well-being can be affected when they have to deal with school issues and actions which might affect their sense of social identity, and their feelings of value and belonging. Other people play an important role in actively constituting one's identity, not only by naming and categorising but also by how they respond to or treat others, stereotypes especially are powerful symbols in this process.

Schools are often the first place where a Minority Ethnic child first comes into contact with not just these stereotypes and prejudices, but also their differences, and especially what others construct or make of this difference. How they go on to be treated by others is first brought to light within school settings. BME children (can) behave differently in different cultural environments – at school and at home, and children's awareness of existing discrimination and prejudice would be greater at school than at home as schools tend to reflect the values and norms that might be different from those at their homes. BME children are also growing up exposed to different cultures, which can result in conflicting demands, and they are especially vulnerable to the distress and unhappiness caused by direct or indirect racial prejudice, the discrimination and abuse, and undermining of their culture, identity and self-esteem. Sometimes, the issues which highlight differences to a BME child and causes them to feel excluded may not even be intentional, but rather by omission, as the following scenario highlights.

Scenario 2

Ahmed's mum received a classroom newsletter informing her of all the activities for that term. Outlined in it, was a list of different religions that will be explored in the class. Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Sikhism, were all included.

It's a Christian faith-based school with Christianity heavily on the agenda anyway. What was glaringly absent for Ahmed's mum was the inclusion of Islam as one of the religions to be covered. Ahmed is the only Muslim in the whole school.

Ahmed's mum did go in to point out this omission and this was promptly addressed by the class teacher who went on to ask the mum if she would come in and talk to the class about Islam.

Ahmed was very excited on the day that they covered Islam and he could not stop talking about how his mum came into school and how his class and friends all know about Eid now.

The above scenario if it had been left unaddressed falls short of a culturally relevant teaching – good teaching for children from ethnic minority groups, on the side of the teacher. The teacher in this case, did not pay enough attention to the specific cultural make-up of her classroom and how this can be used effectively as a tool for inclusion and teaching diversity. To omit the religion of the one child who belongs to that religion is not only to miss a chance to validate Ahmed's self-worth, but also to miss a great teaching moment. In this changing society, educators need to be sensitive to issues related to the two scenarios mentioned in various sections of this chapter, and must always find ways of widening the experiences of majority ethnic children's constructions of identity to include minority groups, in order to help build a socially-inclusive classroom, where every single child feels a sense of belonging.

There is also a need for teachers to be sensitive to the intricate dynamics of Minority Ethnic children's social worlds, and the effects that prejudice

actualised through practices of exclusion and even racial bullying can have on their well-being. One way that teachers can do this is by building a ‘culturally responsive’ classroom as suggested by Bazron et al. (2005). A culturally responsive education can strengthen the BME student’s connectedness and feelings of belonging with the schools. A culturally responsive education is basically knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning more relevant and effective for them. This involves creating an environment that enables teachers and students to connect with one another, starting by something as simple as validating the experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic Children. Making classroom instruction more congruent with the cultural value systems of a diverse student population, is another way. A teacher can try and find ways of using a culturally respectful approaches in character education and social skills instruction. They can also be sensitive to cultural shifts that Black and Minority Ethnic children may make as they move between school and home, being aware of these transition challenges will help develop mechanisms which ease the stress caused by them, and therefore increase a general sense of well-being for the children. This has the potential to establish a learning environment that increases the happiness of all children, as it pays attention to cultural differences and needs.

There is a need for teachers to be sensitive to the intricate dynamics of Minority Ethnic children’s social worlds, and the effects that prejudice actualised through practices of exclusion and even racial bullying can have on their well-being

CONCLUSION

In these times of increasing ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious diversity, it is important that the subject of Black and Minority Ethnic children's well-being and happiness in schools is repeatedly brought to the fore. More research needs to be encouraged on the linkages between societal experiences of racism and prejudice, and how these permeate children's spaces and especially their effects on their happiness and general well-being. This chapter is really intended to get the conversation started, and is by no means conclusive or even inclusive of all experiences. Recognising the diversity and strengths of different learners and especially recognising the increasingly multicultural student population in UK schools is key to meeting the well-being needs of not only BME children, but all children in schools.

There has been a lot of debate around the elimination of discrimination and social injustice in intellectual, political and social spheres, however there has also been many challenges in translating policy rhetoric into practice, and the outcomes of these policies are still not felt materially by the most vulnerable children in our society. Childhood should be a protected phase and it is unacceptable that children who are perceived as different are still being subjected to psychologically harmful situations because many educators of Minority Ethnic children do not pay attention to the recognition of cultural differences, and the effect of difference on children's social identity and feelings of inclusion and exclusion within school settings. A basic awareness of the role of this on Black and Minority Ethnic children's well-being is a useful starting point.

Recognising the diversity and strengths of different learners and especially recognising the increasingly multicultural student population in UK schools is key to meeting the well-being needs of not only BME children, but all children in schools.

NEED TO READ MORE ON THE TOPIC?

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