

## *Disableism, Racism and Young Children*

*Jane Lane*

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### **Summary**

Some children and young people (and, of course, adults) will be subject to discrimination because of their disability and because of their race. In this article, Jane Lane invites all of us to be aware of the potential for this dual inequality and to consider how the two discriminations can interact with each other. She also identifies how prejudiced attitudes and behaviour may impinge on and influence those who are not themselves directly subject to discrimination.

### **Introduction**

All inequalities are unacceptable. And, in principle, none is more unacceptable than another. They are all hurtful, damaging and discriminatory. But because some children may experience more than one inequality it is important to recognise this and understand the implications of how they may interact together.

We all know the institutional and personal barriers facing disabled children, their families and carers, and those working with them. These barriers apply equally to all disabled children and their families, whether they are white or black\* – the barriers facing them are no different. Their shared disabilities are a uniting aspect of their shared humanity.

But, in addition, disabled black and other minority ethnic children may also experience the realities and consequences of racism. Disableism and racism are both so deeply embedded in our society that not everyone recognises their damaging existence. But in this particular discussion of racism and disableism, each is too significant to allow ourselves the luxury to marginalise the other. They impinge upon one another and we need to be familiar with the principles and aspects of both.

It is not always easy, when working with disabled black and white young children, to have the time and opportunities to reflect on how racism impacts on them and their families. The very real practicalities, knowledge and energy needed to take account of their individual needs may preclude the space to find out what racism is, and is not. It may not seem relevant or important in the overall day-to-day work with children. It may almost seem as a distraction, doing a disservice to children to divert attention away from the task of addressing their needs as a result of their disability and improving their life chances as far as possible.

But racism may damage children over and above their specific disability circumstances. Its subtle and insidious impact, even in caring communities, may remain unnoticed. This is not because people do not care whether racism exists or not – most people working with and caring for disabled children loathe racism as much as anyone does. On this occasion it is not the British National Party, racist violence and abuse that are the issue. It is the often-unconscious things that we may do, or may not do. Just not noticing significant things that are happening may, in reality, comprise what is called racism.

It may be helpful to see racism\*\* as a package of things, largely resulting from our history, that includes racial assumptions, stereotypes, judgements, prejudice, discrimination, harassment, cultural racism

and institutional racism. It is the whole package of aspects that, to varying degrees, impinge on the lives of people subjected to it, including children. Together they may disadvantage and discriminate against black children and their families. While nearly all of us know what most of the various aspects mean, the concept of institutional racism may be less familiar.

### **Institutional Racism**

The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report defined institutional racism as being:

The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in *processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping* which disadvantage minority ethnic people.

The key points that I have identified here in bold, demonstrate not deliberate action but the sort of things that most of us do when we perhaps have given something insufficient consideration. So it is important to really understand what racism is, if disabled black children and their families are to have equal chances to others.

Institutional racism has some similarities with the concept of indirect racial discrimination as used in the 1976 Race Relations Act, but its remit is wider.

In my book *Young children and racial justice* I have described in detail, and with lots of examples, how racism works in British society (Lane 2008). Also, I introduced the subject briefly in an article in the Interconnections Electronic Bulletin in June 2009. But reading a book alone is insufficient to understand the power of racism. What is needed is to talk about it – talk between colleagues, between friends and in training courses – openly and honestly, within a no-blame culture. This means recognising and accepting that we all come to every situation with all our own personal histories and experiences – our family backgrounds, educations, cultures, ethnicities, languages, work situations and any religions or beliefs we hold. With this potentially explosive mixture it is not surprising that an understanding and agreement about what racism is, is not immediate.

### **Understanding what Racism is and its Effects on Young Children, Including Disabled Children**

Removing racism, as with disableism, is too serious to be left to chance. Everyone working with young disabled children needs to understand what racism is – as those working with black children need to understand what disableism is. They cannot be put to one side because there is not enough time to take on yet another inequality.

Racism damages all children, black and white, whether they are disabled or not, but in different ways. It damages black children by possibly discriminating against them because of their skin colour, culture, language, religion or ethnicity. For them, any form of racism

is hurtful and may interfere with their ability to learn by reducing their self-confidence and self-esteem, thus detaching them from seeing themselves as being able to participate successfully in the learning process may damage their concept of self-identity and make them believe that they are seen as inferior outside their homes may make them frustrated, upset or even angry at what they see as injustice can affect their behaviour, their motivation and their confidence may limit their access to appropriate resources and learning opportunities and is likely to have a lasting effect on their education and life-chances.

Children from black and other minority ethnic communities need to learn that racism is not their fault and is not the result of anything that they have done. It is important to help them to have a positive self-image and self-esteem. Sometimes black children who have been very strongly supported at home and have been given the skills to counter racism may powerfully stand up against it and appear resilient and confident in their own abilities.

Racism also damages white children. It may:

- lead them to believe that people from black and other minority ethnic backgrounds are somehow less human than they are
- blunt their sensitivity to others and reinforce false notions of their own superiority
- distort their perceptions of reality by failing to provide them with the full range of information on which they can make their own judgements
- deny them the opportunity to meet black children and adults thus allowing them to grow up in ignorance about them – any curiosity about them may be already compounded by myths, possible tensions and fear
- lead them to ignore facts or opinions that have been contributed by black people, thus encouraging them to accept partial information as a basis for decision-making
- deny them the positive experience of learning about valuing difference and
- prevent them from learning concepts of empathy to others – concepts that are fundamental to respecting and valuing one another.

Research evidence over 50 years shows that children learn to recognise skin colour differences well by the age of three. Furthermore, the evidence shows that,

unless they are provided with positive images and messages about such differences they may be learning racially prejudiced attitudes at a very early age.

If we are concerned that children learn to care equally about one another and grow up to be non-prejudiced adults we need to work with all children. We need to provide them with regular opportunities to help them to learn positive and respectful attitudes and behaviour to differences between people – and to unlearn any negative attitudes and behaviour that they may have already learnt. This means working with children to break down racial hierarchies – when some languages, cultures, ethnicities, skin colours and physical features are ranked in a hierarchy where some are considered to be more important, more worthy than others. One of the most effective ways to do this is by working with children using Persona Dolls who share their own personal ‘stories’ with children, including their stories involving their disabilities (Brown 2008).\*\*\*

#### **Understanding how racism affects the policies, practices and procedures in early years services for disabled children**

Caring for and working with young disabled children in terms of racial equality is more than enabling them to learn positive attitudes and behaviour to one another, vitally important though that is. It is about all the other things that are involved in early years services and settings as well – policies, practices and procedures, some of which may be racially discriminatory. Observation and ethnic monitoring are critically important factors in order to ensure that all children enjoy racial equality. The amended 1976 Race Relations Act in the statutory Code of Practice on the duty to promote race equality, Part 111 (CRE 2002) lays down clear requirements for this to happen. They should not be seen as intrusive but as an aid to racial equality for all disabled and non-disabled children.

One way of identifying what needs to be done is to carefully examine every organisational decision that is made in a service or a setting to ensure that it is not discriminatory or potentially discriminatory. This means knowing what comprises unlawful racial discrimination (direct and indirect) and what the law covers. By analysing all the practices, policies and procedures and breaking them down into their basic components we can see the role they play in fostering racial equality or reinforcing racial discrimination. For example:

1. Issues of employment – recruitment and selection of staff, interviewing, who gets access to training, attending conferences and promotion.
2. Admissions of children – selection criteria, waiting lists, choice of attendance hours
3. Training – on legislation, racial equality issues

(including dealing with any incidents of racial prejudice), talking together about what racism is, Persona Dolls, on-going availability of relevant reading and resource materials.

4. Family involvement – times/venues of meetings, joint planning of events, key person approach as fundamental to equality.
5. Preparing for any child who might arrive tomorrow – what this means in terms of resources, their needs, continually preparing all children for any situation that might arise from any potential ‘new’ person’s presence.

The process of identification becomes a practical strategy that can be adapted over time – an action plan. The policy for racial equality lays out the principles of implementing the strategy, including monitoring and observation to demonstrate whether the policy is being effective in reality.

The critical and determining part of all that has been written here is the attitudes of us, ourselves, as adults working with and caring for disabled children, black and white. Making it easier and possible for ourselves, in the ways described above, to understand racism and how it links with disableism is what we should all be aiming for.

\* The term ‘black’ is used here as a shorthand for ‘black and other minority ethnic’.

\*\* There is a detailed discussion of racism in my book, see below.

\*\*\* Persona Dolls are used to develop in children concepts of empathy with people who are different from themselves.

#### **References**

Brown, B. (2008) *Equality in Action – A Way Forward with Persona Dolls*. Trentham Books

Commission for Racial Equality (2002) *Statutory Code of Practice on the duty to promote race equality*

Lane, J. (2008) *Young children and racial justice: taking action for racial equality in the early years – understanding the past, thinking about the present, planning for the future*. National Children’s Bureau. Up to 20% of the book can be read at [www.books.google.com](http://www.books.google.com)

A selection of reviews is available from [jane@janelane.plus.com](mailto:jane@janelane.plus.com)