Responding to racist comments or jokes: some guidance

Why respond?

Feedback from past and current students tells us that racist comments are made, and racist jokes told, on campus and in schools. There are formal structures to address racism that is directed towards a specific individual. For example:

-the University has a Policy for the Protection of Dignity at Work and Study (http://www.exeter.ac.uk/staff/equality/harassment/protectingdignity/) with a network of harassment advisors (http://admin.exeter.ac.uk/misc/harassment/networkofharassmentadvisors.shtml), and a form for reporting discrimination (collect a ‘Speak Out’ form – these are usually available from the library desk, the porters lodge and the postgraduate centre)
- schools are required by law to have a system for reporting and recording racist incidents.

Racist comments or jokes that are not obviously against a particular individual, and are often made in the absence of anyone with a Black or minority ethnic background, may require a different sort of response. There are a number of professional reasons for responding, which include:

- To remain silent risks collusion with underlying racist assumptions, stereotypes or intentions
- The fourth principle GTCE Code of Conduct & Practice for Registered Teachers Oct 2009 (http://www.gtce.org.uk/documents/publicationpdfs/code_of_conduct_1009.pdf) includes an explicit expectation that teachers should: “Demonstrate respect for diversity and promote equality”, and includes a duty to ‘address unlawful discrimination, bullying, and stereotyping, no matter who is the victim or perpetrator’.
- The Professional Standards for QTS (in particular Q1, l2, Q3, Q18, Q19)
- The Professional Standards for other stages in a teacher’s career, e.g. ‘Core’ (NQT Induction: C1, C2, C3, C18, C19…), Post-Threshold (P1, P2 etc), Excellent Teacher (E1, E2, etc), Advanced Skills Teacher (A1, A2, etc).
- Schools are required by the Race Relations Act as Amended (2000) to “have due regard to the need to:
  - eliminate unlawful racial discrimination
  - promote equality of opportunity, and
  - promote good relations between persons of different racial groups”
and teachers must play their part in enabling schools to fulfil these duties.
- Since September 2007, all maintained schools have had a duty to promote community cohesion – “Every school – whatever its intake and wherever it is located – is responsible for educating children and young people who will live and work in a country which is diverse in terms of cultures, religions or beliefs, ethnicities and social backgrounds”. (see DCSF (2007). Guidance on the duty to promote community cohesion)
- The recent Equality Act (2010) introduces provisions outlawing discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief. This specifically includes education in schools.
Respond how?

We cannot offer you ‘the answer’; indeed, we welcome feedback on this guidance.

No guidance can overcome the need for each educator to exercise judgment in the face of a racist comment or joke. Instead, this seeks to offer a framework to underpin such judgments.

1. It is useful to think of long term as well as short term goals.

For example, a short term goal may simply be:

- to lay down a marker, indicating that we have heard the joke or comment and noticed its racial overtones
- to challenge inaccuracies underlying the joke or comment (e.g. myths, stereotypes)
- to make it clear that we find such jokes / comments inappropriate, particularly in school / University.

while your longer term goal may be:

- to educate about race equality, the costs of racial discrimination and harassment, and the benefits of racial equality and ethnic diversity.

2. The terms in which you respond will depend on your authority relationship with the source of the comment or joke: this depends on whether you are dealing with a pupil, a peer, or a colleague within whose authority you work / study.

3. When pupils make racist jokes or comments, there are often behaviour management implications. Much of the guidance about behaviour management is directly relevant, e.g.

- Familiarize yourself with the school policies and procedures relating to racist comments, incidents and harassment; don’t wait until you need them!
- If in doubt, seek advice
- Do use the reporting procedures that are in place, when appropriate
- A measured short term response often leaves a door open to pursue a longer term goal. An initial response based on scorn, vilification or heavy-handed sanctions often closes that door. This is not to say that a pupil who persists with racist jokes or comments should not face sanctions.
- Challenge / problematise the behaviour, not the person
- Follow through: don’t make threats you can’t fulfill, and do carry through any warnings or sanctions that you impart
- Seek opportunities to pre-empt unwanted behaviour
- If it seems appropriate, say that the comment has been noted, is unacceptable, and that there will be follow up at a later date / time (this can create a window of opportunity for a more considered response and the chance to talk through the best response with others as appropriate)

4. There are many ways of inviting pupils or colleagues to reconsider a racist joke or comment that they have made or heard. You will not always convince someone on the spot, but you may cause them to think about what you have said. If you persevere in naming discriminatory behaviour
people will come to anticipate your comments and may in time choose to express themselves differently.

Not all of the example below are without risk - some may elicit anger; in the bigger picture, ignoring racist comments isn’t risk free either.

- **‘This is how I feel about that’**
  One way of responding to discrimination is to say how it makes you feel. You may want to say, for example, ‘When you speak like that, I feel angry’ or ‘hearing that makes me feel uncomfortable; I’d prefer it if you didn’t use that sort of language’. While people may not see why you have these feelings, they cannot deny that you have them. And once they discover how you feel, this may give them some insight into how their behaviour affects others.

- **‘That’s a racist remark.’**
  This is a straightforward response. It is clearer and more direct than the cautious ‘Sounds a bit racist to me’ or the sarcastic ‘Some people round here have never heard of equal opportunities’ or the angry ‘Don’t be so racist!’

  If you decide to name discrimination when you encounter it, be prepared to explain yourself: the other person may not see it as such. A clear and direct explanation may avoid you and/or the other person from being driven into aggressive or defensive positions. **‘What do you mean?’**

  A lot of discriminatory behaviour is presented in the form of jokes, innuendoes, hints or suggestive gestures. Sometimes these are malicious but more often they arise from thoughtlessness or habit. Simply asking for an explanation may encourage someone to review their behaviour. For example, you might ask: ‘Can you explain that to me?’ or ‘What do you mean?’ or ‘Can you explain to me what the joke is?’ or ‘Why is that funny?’ These questions can be confronting. If the joke is stripped away, people are faced with the real implications of what they are saying. You need to be prepared for strong reactions if you use this method of responding.

- **‘Would you say that to a white person?’ ‘What difference does their colour make?’**
  Many people are genuinely unaware of ways in which their behaviour is discriminatory; they may generalise about Black and minority ethnic people without thinking about what they are doing. Asking them if they would behave in the same way towards someone from a different group can show people their hidden assumptions.

5) Looking after the victim.

It’s important that anyone negatively affected by a racist ‘joke’, comment or incident should be taken care of after the incident. As a student teacher you have a ‘duty of care’ to your pupils. This includes making sure that the victim of racism has someone to talk to and knows what is going to happen next.

6) Weave anti-racist practice and thinking into your own teaching.
The best way to challenge racism is long term, by creating opportunities to expose it for what it is – based on anger, misinformation, prejudice, habit and inaccuracies – and to build a different way of thinking and viewing the world. Teachers are in an enviable position of being able to challenge racism through their teaching and their pupils learning.

Some useful resources


- GLEAN (Global Learning Network South West) [http://www.glean.org.uk](http://www.glean.org.uk) can provide links and resources.


- Multiverse: [http://www.multiverse.ac.uk](http://www.multiverse.ac.uk) – a provision designed specifically for student teachers and their tutors: a wealth of materials available, searchable by topic and by QTS Standard.


Appendix:

The Institute for Race Relations website has an on-line quiz that tests our knowledge about Black and minority ethnic communities within the UK: see [http://www.irr.org.uk/quiz/](http://www.irr.org.uk/quiz/).

If you want to try the quiz yourself, DON’T read the back page of this guidance! The back page shows the questions and answers, for those who want to incorporate them in teaching materials.
Racial Stereotyping and myths: Quiz Q&A from the Institute of Race Relations website: http://www.irr.org.uk/quiz/

Q. Since which period has there been a continuous black population in Britain?
A. 1500s (Historians have found that black musicians were playing at the royal courts of both England and Scotland at the beginning of the 1500s.)

Q. How many Indian soldiers served for Britain in the Second World War?
A. 2,500,000. (Two and a half million Indian troops served in the Second World War. They mainly saw action in East Asia and North Africa. 25,000 were killed. A further 3 million people died during the Bengal famine of 1943 which was caused by food being redirected to feed the British army.)

Q. Who was Britain's first black mayor?
A. John Archer 1913. (John Archer became the mayor for Battersea in 1913. He was the first person of African descent to be elected to civic office in Britain - as councillor, alderman and mayor.

Q. In 1892 an Indian businessman, Dadabhai Naoroji, was elected as an MP in Britain. True or false?
A. True (Naoroji became the MP for Finsbury in 1892. He used his seat in Parliament to campaign for the rights of Indian people in the British Empire).

Q. What percentage of the world’s asylum seekers and refugees were living in Britain at the end of 2002?
A. (less than 3%) The total number of people around the world who are refugees or asylum seekers is around 12 million. Of these, 259,300 have come to Britain. This number amounts to 2.2% of the total number of refugees and asylum seekers in the world. It also amounts to less than 0.5% of the total population of Britain. The majority of refugees remain in poorer Asian and African countries.

Source: Figures from the UNHCR Statistical Yearbook 2001 have been combined with asylum applicant figures from the Home Office for 2002

Q. What percentage of Pakistani and Bangladeshi families living in Britain are on low incomes (2001 figures)
A. 59% (British families with a Pakistani or Bangladeshi background are much more likely than other groups to be living on low incomes. Almost 60% of the 1 million people in this group are living in low-income households.

Source: Households Below Average Income, Family Resources Survey, 2000/01, Department for Work and Pensions)

Q. Britain’s first black professional football player was Cyrille Regis who played for West Bromwich Albion from the early 1970s: true or false?
A. False (Arthur Wharton, Preston North End’s goalkeeper, became Britain’s first black professional player in 1896, much earlier than Cyrille Regis).

Q. Of those people living in Britain but born elsewhere in the world, from which of the following regions did the largest number come?
A. Europe (About 8% of the UK population were born abroad. Of these, 31% came from other European countries, 19% from Africa, 20% from the Indian sub-continent and 11% from the Americas including Canada, the USA and the Caribbean.

Source: Migrants in the UK: their characteristics and labour market outcomes and impacts, Home Office, December 2002
Q. 12% of White men in Britain aged 16-24 are unemployed. What percentage of Black Caribbean men aged 16-24 are unemployed (2001 figures)

A. 27% of Black Caribbean men aged 16-24 are unemployed. For Bangladeshi men in the same age range, over 40 per cent are unemployed. Young Black African men, Pakistanis and those belonging to the 'Mixed' group also have very high unemployment rates - they range between 25 per cent and 31 per cent. The comparable unemployment rate for young White men is 12 per cent.

Source: *Annual Local Area Labour Force Survey*, 2001/02, Office for National Statistics

Q. What effect does immigration have on taxpayers?

A. Research by the government estimated that in 1999/2000 migrants in the UK contributed £31.2 billion in taxes and consumed £28.8 billion in benefits and state services, which means that they made an overall contribution of approximately £2.5 billion after rounding. This figure is the equivalent of a 1% decrease in the basic rate of income tax.

Source: *The migrant population in the UK: fiscal effects*, Home Office, February 2002