

KITAB BHAI: A CASE STUDY OF MULTICULTURAL SCHOOLING IN TRINIDAD

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Educators have, since the 1970s, focused on the importance of studies in multicultural experiences in the classroom. These studies examine how multicultural issues may impact on children's learning in their formative years and how best to improve tolerance for diversity amongst students. Studies have shown that numerically derived minority status in schools is an especially fertile context for the creation of inferior behaviour. The widely accepted consensus within the literature suggests that a directed program of study into multicultural appreciation needs to be taught to all children. This paper focuses on the social interactions of two six-year-old minority (East Indian) girls attending separate primary schools where their classmates were children of a majority (African) group. It seeks to find out whether in their day-to-day social interaction the minority group of children experienced or demonstrated behaviours that could be linked to their minority status at school. Findings based on a 16-month data collection period were that there were no negative cultural effects caused by their minority status. The study suggests that multicultural acceptance, in these case studies, was an innate aspect of development for the students. In fact if taken in a larger context the study further suggests that contrary to international trends no directed multicultural program may be necessary for Trinidad primary schools.

Keywords –African, East Indian, multicultural, school, young children,

Introduction

The population of the Caribbean twin island Republic of Trinidad and Tobago is made up of many different races, religions and cultures. It is a diverse society which has traditionally prided itself on the belief of its national anthem that "...here every creed and race finds an equal place". However despite this motto one notes that throughout the Republic's history, race and cultural issues continuously arose between the two equally divided ethnic groups in the population: the Africans and East Indians. Stemming from its colonial origins as a sugar colony the nation experienced importations of firstly, West African and secondly Indian labour between 1789 and 1917. Other diverse ethnic groups were also brought in to supplement the labour scene but these were never in large quantities (Look Lai 1993). Since the Indian labourers were brought in as potential strike breakers to the newly freed African labourers and as scab labour to ensure that wages remained low, the stage was set for antagonistic relations between the two groups. As one historian summed up the relationship, "Creoles [Africans] of all colours despised Indians...But we can feel fairly sure that the contempt was mutual" (Brereton 1979:188).

Following the attainment of the twin island's Republican status in 1976 and even before, concerted efforts were made to ensure that the colonial legacy of racial antagonism based on cultural differences would be eliminated. To this end the government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago outlined a national cultural policy that focused on the aim of "unity in diversity". This policy was in sync with the goals established for its education syllabi that expected schools to contribute to national development, employment and upward mobility for all of its citizens. To attain this mobility for all its citizens a level playing field was necessary in which all students had equal access to resources and were not discriminated against in any way. Cultural issues and understandings were central to this level playing field especially so in the multicultural society of Trinidad. Multicultural in this context is being used to refer to the many different kinds of cultures existing within the society (Giugni 2007).

The national standards developed for regulating early childhood services (Trinidad and Tobago, Ministry of Education, 2004) mandated the provision of equal opportunities for all children in early learning environments. This standard insisted that all members of staff treat the children they teach and their families with concern. They should respect the religion, culture and linguistic background as well as the gender and ability of all children. (10)

This local standard was based on international good practise which argues that a child's culture is related to his or her ethnicity which is also linked to the cultural background of the child's parents and family members (Derman-Sparks & Edwards 2010). There are two provisos to this argument however. The first being that within a cultural group a family may not necessarily practice or believe all aspects that the larger cultural group subscribes to. As a consequence practices in a person's daily life may not necessarily reflect the norm for that person's culture. The second proviso emerges from the nature of the establishment of the dominant culture. This culture refers to the culture of the majority and may be the group who holds social, political and economic power in a society or institution. In an institution such as a school, the dominant culture could therefore refer to the culture of the majority who may be the teachers and students. The point being that in this case within the school there can be created a dominant culture quite apart from the student's family or cultural practices of the group he/she belongs to outside the school.

While the country's Ministry of Education emphasized a multicultural approach much of the actual interpretation and implementation of this approach was left to the teachers and the classroom interaction they fostered amongst pupils. This interaction was especially important within the field of early childhood education focused on the developmental needs of young children in their formative years. It is important then that young children learn how to understand and respect the cultural diversity within their peer groups. It is within this context that this study was based on two children who held a minority status in schools dominated by a larger majority group of children. The study was aimed towards identifying instances of discrimination initiated by the students and teachers against the minority group of children. This discrimination was interrogated in the context of the focus groups not having the experience of a structured multicultural curriculum and who therefore may not have been adequately prepared to accommodate children from a cultural background that was different from their own.

More specifically, the purpose of the study was to examine ways in which two six- year- old girls of East Indian descent experienced multicultural exchanges with their peers of African descent. In its methodology the study identified all incidences of bias observed and analysed them to determine the cause and the effect on the case study children. It also looked at the supports for learning, which the children of minority status received to determine the source of support, and if there was any significant factor linked to their minority status.

The following research study questions therefore guided the investigation:

1. How can incidences of bias that involved the children of East Indian descent and their classmates of African descent be interpreted?
2. Did the cultural differences affect the learning potential of the minority students?

Conceptual Framework and Context

Two theories formed the basis of this paper. The first revolved around the understanding of Evans (2001) who argued that Multicultural interactions have the potential to negatively impact on the self-concept of Caribbean children. His argument is based on the legacy of colonialism and the negative self-imaging it left based on race, attitudes and on Eurocentric values (19). The second is based on Vygotsky's socio-cultural constructivism as explained in Follari (2007). This theory expressed the view that even though knowledge is constructed through active mental processes it is still influenced by the learner's social and cultural environment, prior experiences, people and beliefs.

Taken collectively these two theories established the working assumptions on which the study was based. They also determined the methodological design and the method of analysis. That is a qualitative study was preferred since guided by the recommendation of Hatch (1995) qualitative methods are better suited for answering questions in early childhood settings. Also through the inductive analysis process that is characteristic of the qualitative paradigm the thick, rich descriptions that I sought to explain the phenomenon under study could be derived from interview and observation data. Other important concepts related to multicultural learning and which were considered within the study revolved around issues of bias. Psychologists believe that bias is usually expressed automatically in an unconscious, subtle and indirect form. Few

persons demonstrate blatant bias that results in acts of aggression and hate crimes. Subtle bias therefore seems to be the type more likely to be found in a primary school setting. This type of bias leads to acts of discrimination where persons find comfort in their own member group and exclude and avoid those who do not belong to their group (Fiske 2002:123). It arises out of internal conflict with cultural ideals and cultural biases. It can lead to cognitive, social and behavioural responses. A dominant group can dislike a minority group and as a result justify social exclusion of its members.

It is also noteworthy that children are influenced by identities, culture, language and bias from an early age. From birth they begin to understand their racial identities in relation to that of their parents and how social groups are defined by society (Derman- Sparks & Edwards 2010). One study showed that infants under age one became less interested when shown photographs of similar faces. However their interest level picked up when they were shown a picture of a face with a different skin colour. This suggests that children notice differences in skin colour from an early age. Additionally, all children are subjected to an externally defined identity that is imposed. Further members of one cultural group can choose to identify with aspects of culture from another group. These understandings help children to form their identity and are likely to be observed in multicultural interactions at school. As a consequence Derman- Sparks & Edwards (2010:11) have recommended that issues of prejudice and diversity be addressed in anti- bias curriculum to help children develop a positive self-image and respect for others who may be ethnically different.

Methodology

This qualitative, case study explored the phenomenon of multicultural expressions among young Caribbean children in their second year at primary school. The main objective was to describe incidences of bias that involved the two cases studied- one six-year-old girl at each school. The study also aimed to identify the supports for learning which each child received. I wanted to accurately capture any incidence of bias that may have resulted when an East Indian child was the only ethnically different pupil in a class of African students. At Hilltop Government Primary Sita (six years old) was purposefully selected for the study from a class of 29 boys and girls. Chandra was selected from a class of 24 children because she was the only East Indian child in the second year class studied at St. David's Primary School.

Since the research aimed to provide data on children from disadvantaged situations the two schools were selected in one sub- urban community that serve mainly children from poor and underprivileged families. The majority of the community members were Africans with a minority of East Indian residents. This ethnic mix was represented in the two classrooms studied. The schools though both mixed (serving boys and girls) also represented a possible difference in social experiences. Parents perceived St David's Primary to be the better school in terms of academic outcomes and dedication to teaching and learning. Also the class teacher at Hilltop had 31 years experience and had Certificate training in early education while the teacher at St David's was teaching for four years and had a Diploma in Education. The issue of generalizability in qualitative research was thus addressed by purposively selecting sites that share similarities and yet have differences with each other.

Data were collected through unobtrusive observations of pupil/ teacher and pupil/ pupil interactions during formal class time and also during informal break periods like daily recess. These observations were undertaken throughout the 16 months of the study and field notes on observed behaviour were recorded. Activities in two classrooms were observed for 2 half- day sessions each week for the first term. Thereafter the observation method was modified to include a mid- term observation period of 6 weeks during which time 3 consecutive whole day sessions were spent at each school. This allowed the researcher to better understand the school context and gain a broader view of the social interactions at each setting. It also provided the time needed to do member checks to clarify observations made and to triangulate data. There were also additional follow up visits to clarify findings.

Data were also collected from taped interviews with the school principals, teachers, children and parents. These were later transcribed, coded and categories of similar data that emerged were classified under theme headings used to organize the analysis. Strict ethical standards were observed. For example all respondents- principals, teachers, parents and children were given a

guarantee of anonymity. As a result throughout this report pseudonyms have been used for school names and individuals mentioned.

Findings of the Study

First of all no overt incidences of bias associated with the minority status of the two East Indian girls were observed during the study. A closer analysis identified subtle bias. I found that there was bias by all children regardless of ethnicity against any boy or girl whose behaviour was inappropriate. Further there were instances when the East Indian children mentioned skin colour in a negative way. These utterances were however always mentioned in anger and linked to the inappropriate behaviour of “black boys” (the label children used) who were being unkind to other children. It was interesting that this mention was made at both schools and in each instance African children also made the same references. This seemed to indicate that even though skin colour was mentioned in a negative light by the case study children the trigger was the inappropriate behaviour of others (usually boys) and not ethnic bias. Additionally the children expressed a disapproval of bullies. It was noteworthy that the teachers also labelled children whose behaviours were inappropriate and the students were merely repeating the established categories.

Bias against inappropriate child behaviours not linked to ethnic differences was therefore the major theme that consistently informed the first research study question. Four categories emerged within the theme. They were: General bias against inappropriate peer behaviour; stereotyping of “black”, male and bad behaved; dislike for bullies and teacher labelling of children with inappropriate school related skills.

The following analyses incidences of bias that occurred.

Bias against Inappropriate Peer Behaviour

At both schools incidences of bias observed that involved the case study children were linked to inappropriate behaviours by classmates. For example when Sita commented to a playmate during recess break, “me nah like he” referring to Damien her classmate, she also gave the reason. She said that he was greedy. He had snatched a piece of her sandwich and eaten it. On another occasion Sita shared her breakfast sandwich with Damien her seatmate. She then came to me and complained, “Miss Damien greedy! He snatch the bread from mih hand and put it in his mouth.” When I questioned Damien’s teacher to clarify my understanding of the behaviour Sita described, she said that Damien would “raff” (snatch) things he wanted like food or a pencil or crayon from children during class time.

I observed Damien snatching snacks from children as they walked in the playground on two occasions during the morning recess break. As he ran off the victim shouted an angry remark at him. Thus I concluded that Sita’s expression of dislike for Damien seemed to have been linked to his aggressive behaviour regarding snatching whatever item he wanted from children. There was no evidence to support a link between Sita’s expression of dislike for Damien and his ethnic difference. Also Damien did not single her out as a victim because she was the only East Indian in the class. Instead Sita did not like Damien because he behaved inappropriately and snatched things he wanted from children instead of asking.

There were instances too when Sita and Chandra, though at different schools, each expressed dislike for “a black boy”. One such negative reference to skin colour occurred while Sita was playing with three friends at recess time and was teased by an approaching peer, who after calling the name of a boy in another class said,

“Sita love a boy in first year but he black like a pitch boy”.

Sita replied, “Me nah like him!” The peer continued to laugh and tease. Sita continued,

“Yes, he black like a pitch boy! He black like a board [black chalkboard]”. The group of four friends all laughed.

On another occasion Chandra complained to me, “Miss de black boy push me.” She was walking with a friend at recess time when a boy ran between them and accidentally pushed her.

Two points were noteworthy from examining the contexts in which the dislike expressed occurred. First of all the dislike was usually linked to the inappropriate behaviour of ‘black boys’. Secondly the dislike for ‘black boys’ was not confined to the children of East Indian descent. For example on one occasion a child from the majority group expressed her dislike for a

black boy whom she and her two friends did not like because she said, “The black boy lie and throw down people and make we get licks.”

Incidences like these seem to suggest that the children were demonstrating their awareness of differences in skin colour rather than racial differences. Also a culture of stereotyping dark skinned boys and linking their skin colour to “bad behaviour” existed among the children regardless of their ethnicity. As a consequence at both schools there were instances when such a boy was labelled, disliked and shunned by the children. It is quite likely that boys who were dark in complexion were disliked and expected to be ‘bad behaved’ by the children. This awareness of differences in skin colour can be related to the views of Derman- Sparks & Edwards (2010) who noted that from birth children begin to understand differences in racial identities and also how social groups are defined by society. Additionally Day (2010) in Washington and Andrews (2010) expressed the view that in society “blackness is responded to negatively” (67).

The reference to skin colour by the children however appeared to be incidental. The main trigger for the response was the inappropriate behaviour. As a consequence, the problem appears to be best analysed as a child development issue. Rejected boys Ladd (2005:111) noted act in ways that reflect the reputation they develop among their classmates. It seems quite likely that the dislike of “black boys” was linked to the rejection they received from their peers. Adult intervention was probably needed to break the cycle and assist children to desist from equating boys and dark skin with “bad behaviour”.

Another issue was Chandra’s expressed fear of being bullied. Miss Johnson, Chandra’s class teacher said that Chandra often arrived at school anxious and in an unpleasant mood. Her mother related Chandra’s anxiety on arrival at school to her fear of being bullied. Chandra had been a victim of bullying and was therefore afraid. When she started school a classmate brought her elder brother to “beat her up”. Although the matter was reported to the principal and it was handled to the satisfaction of the parents, Chandra remained afraid and anxious about school. In her child interview Chandra stated, “I don’t like Keysha because she did bring she big brother to beat me an I didn do notin. He slap me up.” She developed a fear for and dislike of children who bullied her. Sita however was not bullied and had no fear.

To investigate the cause of the bullying Chandra experienced I interviewed her mother. I asked what she felt was the reason why her daughter was a victim of bullying and generally how the other children related to Chandra at school. Her response was,

“Well they are normal children. I’ll ask her, anybody fight today in school? (She will reply) No mamie. Because sometimes you know children they take away one another pencil. But I don’t really dig up too much in it because they does fight and come back good. She does come and complain and I will tell the teacher or her father will tell the teacher and they will deal with it.”

Chandra’s parents also confirmed that by nature their daughter got anxious quite easily. After the incident Chandra’s mother put measures in place to safeguard her daughter from possible attacks before school started on mornings. Chandra’s mother said, “If I drop her most of the time she does be with me until the bell ring and she go on line and then I will leave her there... When the father or grandfather drop her they will wait too.”

What seemed to be emerging was a picture of a school culture in which some children bullied weaker peers. When complaints were made to the teacher the bullies were reprimanded. Chandra was a victim not because she was from a minority group but because she appeared to have been an easy target. She had no friends or elder siblings. The other minority student, Sita had a different situation and experience. Sita was assertive, made friends quite easily and had an elder sister at school who visited her at recess and lunch breaks with friends, to “check on” her younger sister. Ladd (2005:269) review of research on causes for peer victimization revealed that multiple causes such as child, peer and family factors determine risk. The same factors can also be protective factors for some children.

This research seemed to be applicable to Chandra’s experience. Bullying did not appear therefore to be related to a child’s minority status at school but rather to a typical bully-victim situation where personality and a support structure could serve as mitigating factors. By the end of the school year however, there was a slight reduction in Chandra’s anxiety level and she made two friends. Chandra said of her friendship, “I like Kelly because she does play with meh.” It can be

surmised that bullying was a problem for one of the two East Indian girls because of her personality type and the supports available at school for her protection at the time of the incident. Bullying did not persist and was not found to be related to the student's minority status.

Teacher Labelling of Inappropriate Child Behaviours

At both schools teachers sometimes used labels with negative connotations to describe the case study children. Although Chandra's teacher referred to her as "a good reader" and a "hard worker" Chandra was also labelled as "babyish" and "pampered". Sita's teacher called her a "nice child" but also labelled her as being "bold face" when she expressed her opinion on matters that arose without the teacher's invitation to comment. For the purpose of this study incidents of negative labelling by the teacher was further investigated to identify teacher intent and the possibility of cultural bias. The negative labels were not however found to be confined to the East Indian children. Within the culture of the school any child could receive a label from the teacher. Children of African descent were also labelled. For example Tania was "brilliant" but more often referred to as being "frontish". Dana had a "wrench up face". Teachers seemed to have been labelling behaviours they wished children would change. Since labelling by teachers was therefore not directed at the East Indian children only, it can be concluded that labelling by the teachers was not racially motivated.

Miss Johnson for example explained that she wished Chandra would not fear school because it made her moody and negatively affected how she did her schoolwork. However she expressed her dislike of Chandra's behaviour by saying, "She wants to go home if the teacher is not there but she's O.K. if Miss is there." She further attributed the source of Chandra's problem to the fact that she was an only child whom she believed was pampered at home by her parents. Since at school a quiet, non-disruptive child was seen as a good student by the teacher labels were used to let the students know that their behaviours were inappropriate. These interpretations of good and bad behaviour could be linked to behaviour expectations from the island's colonial past where masters demanded a docile, non-disruptive worker.

The teacher did not interpret children's behaviour as being caused by stress. Kyriacou (2003) referred to the negative emotions pupils display as a result of experiences at school, as pupil stress. Evans (2001) is of the view however that in the Caribbean, the physical appearance and behaviour of the child such as being well mannered can influence how the teacher reacts to the child. Chandra was most probably labelled because her teacher's cultural understanding allowed her to view Chandra's crying as inappropriate behaviour. She hoped to change the behaviour by criticizing the child through labelling. A more appropriate response Katz and McClellan (1997) suggested was to clearly state the desired behaviour rather than call a child "babyish" for example (81).

The second research question was:

2. Did the cultural differences affect the learning potential of the minority students?

Two major themes emerged to inform the possible influence of cultural differences on the learning potential of the case study children.

They were - *Child Attributes and Behaviours* and *Parent Involvement in the Programme*.

Child Attributes and Behaviours

Individual child attributes influenced how children were viewed by their teachers and friends and the supports they received in their day-to-day interactions. For example during the first week of the second term at school Chandra continued to cry when she was dropped off to school. She spoke to few classmates but she had no real friend. As time progressed however the teacher said, "She stayed much better." In class she soon started to finish her schoolwork quickly and over time became more focused and relaxed. She always paid attention to what was being taught by the teacher. She eventually got two friends.

Chandra was a Typical Child. *Typical Children* according to Abdul-Majied (2009) experienced some problems at times but were generally willing and able to conform to school rules. Out of class they played with friends with minimal conflict. They needed help at times and depended on the teacher or an adult to provide that assistance. There were times when some children in this

category deviated from the norm temporarily often when influenced by another child. Chandra had the attributes and behaviour of a *Typical Child*.

Though she was more assertive than Chandra, Sita was also classified as a *Typical Child*. At the start of the school year she did not express her wishes and wants. The teacher said that at first Sita would send a classmate to say what she wanted. However later on she approached the teacher and said whatever “came to her head.” The teacher referred to her developing behaviour in a negative way as she said Sita was becoming “Bold Face”. It is noteworthy that some of the other children who were not East Indians shared similar behaviours and were similarly labelled. Generally however her teacher said that she liked Sita.

Sita was loving and never angry her teacher said. All the children liked her. The girls liked her hair. Children invited her to play in their group and often she held hands with her friends to go and play. On one occasion she ran to me and hugged me as I arrived. Her friends followed. Sita shared and exchanged food with her friends. She did however say that she liked to walk on the bench if the teacher was absent.

Sita’s parents seemed to have taught her the learning related social skills that help children to adjust to school. Bronson cited in Entwisle and Alexander (1998) included among those learning- related skills, listening, following directions and organizing work materials. Alexander, Entwisle and Dauber (1993) noted that social/ behavioural characteristics such as interpersonal skills were also needed to assist children to adjust to schools. Sita had both the work related skills and the interpersonal skills that helped to support her interactions at school.

The ways in which family was involved in the school programme also influenced the support the children received at school. Chandra’s parents and grandfather were very involved in the school programme. They ensured that she was punctual and regular at school and that all her school supplies were provided. They dropped her off to school on mornings and waited until the bell rang for the start of school. They also gave her extra exercises to do at home. Her mother said, “I give her some on her own to do and she will do it... Her grandfather helps with homework too. He was a teacher.” Chandra’s mother said that her daughter liked school and enjoyed doing schoolwork. She said, “As she gets home she goes behind the reading book I tell her to wait a minute, cool out first but she so persistent. She want me to pick up the reading one time.”

Additionally, both parents attended Parent Teacher (PTA) Meetings. Her grandfather assisted in taking her to school and helping with her homework and other school related matters. The following entry in her teacher’s Class Log of Significant Events supports the fact that her parents tried to ensure that the teacher understood Chandra’s need. The log report said, “Chandra’s grandfather wrote a letter informing me of her urinary infection so she has to go to use the toilet frequently.”

While Sita did not have a parent who dropped her to school or to inform the teacher about special situations, her elder sister who also attended the same school provided that support as it was needed. Sita walked to school with her older sibling and went to her class. She did not have any problem with being left on her own in class. At recess time her sister often visited to ensure that she had a pencil to write with and that generally she was all right. Her mother provided Sita with all her school supplies and attended PTA meetings.

Parent and family support provided a communication link between the home and school that is a necessary part of young children’s education. Chandra’s school principal acknowledged this when he said, “Children who tend to give problems most of the times are those pupils whose parents have not been a part of the programme.” The principal’s statement referred to the children in his school in general. There was no distinction in the types of supports children needed and received that could be attributed to ethnic differences. Both students were A-students as they performed among the top 10 children academically. Trinidad and Tobago. Ministry of Education, (2004) acknowledges that parents have a critical role to play in their children’s education since they are the first line of interaction with their children (8).

Conclusion

Though different instances of bias were observed in this study, they could all be linked to children’s inappropriate behaviours rather than to racial discrimination. There was no instance of bias that could be attributed to discrimination against the two East Indian girls who were in the

minority to the African children in the schools under review. Similarly no negative reference to race was recorded from the East Indian children against their African classmates. In fact, there was no acknowledgement of racial differences observed. The data also demonstrated that cultural differences were not the main factor affecting educational achievement for the minority students. Based on teacher feedback and the records of the students of both groups it seemed that parent support in general, rather than specific ethnic differences was the deciding factor for student performance.

The findings seem to further suggest that contrary to the prevailing literature on multiculturalism, some young children base their social interactions on factors “other than” ethnic differences. From the study it was demonstrated that the way students were treated by their peers and teachers was primarily due to their learned social behaviour and not their minority status. This was an especially important observation in the schools, as they had no planned multicultural curriculum in effect. Since no discrimination was observed against the two East Indian children there seemed to be no need for using an Anti-bias curriculum to teach goals like being aware of social identities, being comfortable with diversity and understanding unfairness and how to act against discrimination. These directed goals while being appropriate for the North American setting was not a problem for the Caribbean children in this study.

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