**Research Proposal 1 (Grade A)**

**‘Ability’ and ethnicity: education policy, institutional practice and the construction of learner identities in Early Years and Primary education**

In this first example, although the bulk of the proposal concerns the student’s forthcoming MPhil/PhD research, they propose to use their master’s dissertation as a pilot to trial the overall research aims and the methodology for the wider and longer study.

The headings that the writer uses are:

Introduction

Literature and Conceptual background

Research focus

Research Questions

Methodology

Rationale for methodology (*heading could be combined with the above\**)

The Schools (*or The sample\**)

The initial interviews and pilot observations (*or The methods\**)

The fieldwork

Data Analysis

Ethical considerations and potential difficulties

Proposed Timeline

References

*\* The text in italics is my own*

**‘Ability’ and ethnicity: education policy, institutional practice and the construction of learner identities in Early Years and Primary education**

Introduction

This research aims to further our understanding of why children from different ethnicities achieve differently at school. The disparity in the attainment of children from different ethnicities in British schools is an issue which has generated much research and public debate, and this research aims to extend understanding of the problem in the light of recent educational reform. Research has traditionally focused on the role of secondary education in creating and maintaining educational disadvantage, but this project seeks to use data from early years settings to question the assumption that the ‘ethnicity gap’ can be explained as the product of secondary education alone. I propose to explore the impact of education policy on the institutional practices in Reception classes, and the role of these practices in constituting learner identities and reproducing raced patterns of attainment.

Literature and Conceptual Background

Research undertaken at secondary level has revealed that the atmosphere and pressures of modern British education have resulted in a system which, at a structural level, disadvantages those from certain ethnic minorities (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000). Conceptions of ‘ability’ as fixed and measurable were found to be entrenched in a system which prioritises high-stakes tests, and discourses about ability were found to be implicitly racialised. Resources were ‘rationed’ due to the pressures of tests and league tables, and minority ethnic pupils, particularly those of Afro-Caribbean origin, were disproportionately seen as ‘hopeless cases’ (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000). Meanwhile, research by Archer and Francis (Archer and Francis, 2007) shows that teachers’ conceptions of the culture and ability of Chinese secondary students facilitates their educational success, while simultaneously reinforcing racialised and racist conceptions of these students and their families.

Although there is a wide literature on ‘race’ in the primary school (Connolly, 1998; Siraj-Blatchford, 1994; Wright, 1992) and patterns of attainment at this level are beginning to attract attention (Bhattacharyya et al., 2003) there has been little detailed consideration of the processes that lead to these raced patterns of attainment at primary level, and the connections to recent educational reforms. While Connolly’s case study of ‘race’ in infant classrooms provides examples of differing race discourses, such as the perceived resistance and rebellion of African-Caribbean boys and the feminisation of Asian boys (Connolly, 1998), this study cannot resolve contemporary questions of racialised patterns of attainment in primary schools, particularly those concerned with recent reform of assessment procedures.

This research project is also connected to Youdell’s recent research into the connections between race and other identity categories, and student and learner identities (Youdell, 2006b). Youdell’s work engages with a Foucauldian conception of the individual as produced as a result of discourses, and therefore recognises the power of discourses about ability in constituting individuals' identities. This research would similarly engage with a Foucauldian conception of discourse, which would allow the research to consider the impact of implicitly racialised discourses on the formation of pupils’ identities and on student, teacher, classroom and school practices.

The proposed research also connects to Apple’s work on the role of educational reform in perpetuating educational inequality by ethnicity, as it considers the impact of government reforms on teachers’ practice and pupils’ experiences (Apple, 2006). Apple describes race as functioning as an ‘absent presence in discussions of markets and standards’ (Apple, 1999), thus making the link between government policy and those school practices which disadvantage minority ethnic pupils. As Apple comments, research in the UK into ethnicity and educational policy dominates our understanding of the issue worldwide, and I would hope that this research would carry on in this critical tradition (Apple, 2006). Furthermore, this research would engage with Critical Race Theory (CRT), an as-yet little used basis for research in the UK, and would thus combine the UK-based tradition with critical theory from the US. This project would answer calls from British and US scholars to use CRT in research in the UK (Gillborn, 2006). This research will also engage with worldwide debates about the marketisation of education and background literature will include research from New Zealand, Sweden and Norway into the effects of recent similar education policies on ethnic minority attainment (Aasen, 2003; Lauder and Hughes, 1999).

As this research examines early years assessment processes, it will also engage with the emerging ‘sociology of assessment’, which argues that assessment is a social product (Filer, 2000; Walters, 2007), and with literature on the specifics of early years education (Connolly, 2004; Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke, 2000).

Research Focus

I wish to investigate whether the pressures introduced into early years and primary education by the introduction of the Foundation Stage Profile and teacher- and test-based assessment at Key Stage 1 and 2 have resulted in the production of racialised discourses about ‘ability’ in primary settings, similar to those identified in secondary settings (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000). The proposed project would consider in-depth the impact of discourses of ‘ability’ and educational reform on different ethnicities.

Revisions to the assessment regimes in primary schooling, in particular the introduction of the Foundation Stage Profile (FSP) at age 5, have significantly increased levels of teacher assessment. This change exists alongside the continued significance of test results and league tables. It is therefore a pertinent time to explore the impact of these policies on institutional practice. National data from the FSPs, which are conducted through teacher assessment, shows a racialised pattern of achievement similar to that found at GCSE: the percentage of white British children meeting the expected level in one of the Language, Communication and Literacy criteria was 52% in 2003 (the most recent available detailed data), compared to 40% for Black African children and 30% for Bangladeshi pupils (Department for Education and Schools (DfES), 2005; Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2005; ONS, 2007a; ONS, 2007b).

This research will focus specifically on the impact of the FSP on Reception classrooms, but will consider the wider institutional changes in primary schools brought about by changes to assessment regimes. Research already undertaken has suggested that a discourse of ‘expected levels’ that derives from standardised testing pervades notions of assessment in all years of primary school (Reference to author's work). The Reception year has been selected because it is when the FSP is completed, and the FSP has now been running for a number of years. In particular, this is a useful research focus because there is statistical evidence that minority ethnic students underperform in the FSP process, as in every subsequent assessment process (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2005; ONS, 2007a; ONS, 2007b). This attainment gap is particularly concerning given the results of the ‘baseline’ assessment tests, which were carried out on entry to school rather than though long-term teacher assessment, which showed equal attainment across ethnicities (Gillborn, 2006).

There is as yet little research on the role and impact of the FSP on early years settings or teachers’ practices: only one study exists to my knowledge (Kirkup et al., 2003). This project will investigate in depth how policy translates into practice and discourse, and how these practices and discourses impact on children of different ethnicities. This will include consideration of all ethnicities, consideration of the impact of having English as an additional language, and discussion of the concept of the ‘ideal client’ of schooling, which can be linked to white middle class pupils, as I found in my previous research (Bradbury, 2007).

*Research Questions*

* What is the impact of education policy on discourses of assessment, and in particular those about ability, in primary schools?
* Are discourses of ability implicitly racialised?
* How do teachers construct pupils’ identities, including ideas such as the ‘ideal client’ of schooling?
* What is the role of early years and primary education in reproducing racially-structured patterns of attainment?

Methodology

This project has emerged from previous research into teacher assessments of different ethnicities (Reference to author’s work) and the first exploratory parts of the research will form the MRes dissertation in the research training year. The fieldwork will begin with semi-structured interviews with the Reception teachers at the sample of three schools, and a pilot observation study at one of these schools over at least one week. This will lead on to extended ethnographic observation, further interviews and document analysis at the sample schools over a full academic year. Initial research into the FSP process, both from official documentation and classroom experience, has provided a thorough background knowledge of the FSP process as prescribed by the DCSF and the Qualifications and Curriculum authority (DCSF, 2007; QCA, 2007).

*Rationale for methodology*

A case study approach is appropriate as it allows a thorough understanding of the institutional practices of the schools. The unit of analysis is the whole school because I am considering the discourses surrounding assessment in general, with a particular focus on the Reception classrooms. The characteristics of a case study make it ideally suited to answering my research questions: the detailed approach means that case studies can ‘give a voice to the powerless and voiceless’ (Feagin, Orum and Sjoberg, 1991). This is particularly true of ethnographic case studies, which, through what Clifford Geertz called ‘thick description’, aim to understand the culture of a setting and the way in which the meanings of particular actions and discourses are constructed (Geertz, 1973).

*The Schools*

The schools will be selected from one inner London borough, on the basis of ensuring a balance between several factors, following Yin and Stake’s recommendations that case selection offers the opportunity to maximise what can be learned (Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994). The borough has been selected because it has a variety of different ethnic minorities, a significant white population, and a range of different socio-economic groups. The first factor in selecting the sample of schools will be that the schools will differ in terms of the balance of ethnicities, ideally with at least one school with a white majority, one with a white minority, and one with an equal balance. Some differences between the minority ethnic groups will also be necessary to allow thorough investigation of the impact of English as an additional language (EAL) factors. Secondly, schools will be selected on the basis of ensuring a balance of socio-economic groups, calculated from free school meals data. Thirdly, the religious affiliation or community status of the schools will be considered to ensure variety. Finally, the size and structure of the school will considered: the study will only include schools with joint infant and juniors (so that the impact of Key Stage 2 testing on assessment practices in Key Stage 1 and the Foundation Stage can be considered) and will ideally include both one-form entry and two-form entry schools. Both schools with and without nurseries will be included so that the impact of 1 or 2 years of producing the FSP can also be discussed. The City Challenge ‘Families of Schools’ data, which includes detailed breakdowns of pupils’ ethnicities as well as many other school characteristics, will be used to aid selection of the schools.

*The initial interviews and pilot observation*

Initial interviews will be conducted with the Reception teachers at the three sample schools. The interview schedule will have been piloted before it is used with the sample school teachers. The Reception teachers will be asked about their experiences of the FSP process (the FSP is updated termly and evidence is collected on a daily basis), and about the children in their classes, in order to gauge their understanding of, attitude to and experience of the FSP process, and to begin to uncover the impact of discourses of ‘ability’. From these interviews, one school will be used as a pilot for a short-term ethnographic study; it will be selected from the three for pragmatic reasons. This pilot will explore whether the research tools are appropriate in answering the research questions, before the long-term fieldwork is begun. The data from this fieldwork will be analysed in the MRes dissertation.

*The fieldwork*

Fieldwork will be undertaken at the sample schools for one day each week for the full academic year from September to July; this will be adjusted as necessary as the fieldwork progresses. This length of time is necessary in order to observe the entire FSP process from the children’s arrival to the delivery of FSP data to the local authority, and the changes that happen during the course of the year.

Data collection will consist of: ethnographic observation; informal and semi-structured interviews with the class teacher, nursery nurses, and assessment coordinators; and document analysis of the FSPs themselves, teachers’ notes and observations and the school’s policies. This combination of approaches will enable any findings to be triangulated to increase validity (Yin, 1994).

The structure of the fieldwork will be flexible to enable the research to explore particular findings, but some key events will be thoroughly observed. For example, the FSP is usually updated officially each term on the basis of observations by teachers and nursery nurses, children’s work, and structured assessment tasks which take place daily, and the translation of this information into the official document will be of particular significance. This process will be observed and discussed with the teacher each term. Parents’ evenings will also be observed, if possible, to allow some exploration of the role of parental expectations in teachers’ production of the FSPs. If necessary, some observation of assessment processes in other year groups could be carried out to explore the culture of assessment in the school and provide context for the Reception class data. The interviews with assessment coordinators (usually a senior teacher, teaching elsewhere in the school) will be asked about the assessment regimes in general at the school, in order to ascertain the overall impact and significance of assessment in the culture of the school, and provide context for the observations and interviews with the Reception teachers.

Data Analysis

Once collected, data will be transcribed where necessary and coded into a range of themes, which will emerge through the fieldwork period. Following Yin’s recommendations to increase validity (Yin, 1994), multiple sources of evidence will be used and attempts will be made to establish a chain of evidence. However, it will not be possible to have a draft study reviewed by the key informants, as Yin recommends, as this will affect their subsequent behaviour. Nonetheless, to increase validity, the coded themes will be discussed with another researcher and the process could perhaps be repeated to ensure that I am not making biased inferences. I intend to use a computer software programme such, an NVivo, to aid my analysis.

As discussed, data will be analysed within a framework which uses a Foucauldian conception of discourse. This involves understanding discourses as bodies of knowledge that are productive as well as descriptive of the social world and with the potential to operate as ‘regimes of truth’ (Foucault and Gordon, 1980). This research will consider not only the dominant discourses but the also the ways in which ‘some voices, some modes of articulation and forms of association are rendered silent’ (Maguire and Ball, 1994). This connects with Youdell’s work, using Judith Butler’s work on Foucault (Youdell, 2006a), on the performative constitution of subjects and the reproduction of educational inequalities and exclusions.

Ethical considerations and potential difficulties

The research will be carried out within the BERA guidelines and will be examined by the Institute of Education ethics committee, and will be informed by literature on the particular issues involved in researching race and ethnicity (Connolly and Troyna, 1998; Gunaratnam, 2003; Troyna, 1995). The participants will be informed that the research will explore the introduction of the FSP into Reception classrooms and assessment cultures, and that issues such as ethnicity, gender and class will be a consideration. The specific focus will not be explained in order to avoid changing the teachers’ behaviour. This is justified within BERA guidelines as the research design requires some withholding of information. The participants will of course have the right to withdraw at any time and all participants, the schools and the borough will be anonymised. Any findings will be discussed with the schools, if they wish, after the fieldwork has finished. I will also gain a CRB check before beginning the fieldwork.

Proposed Timeline

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| Spring Term 2008 | Review of the literature  Construction of semi-structured interview schedule and pilot |
| Summer Term 2008 | Initial interviews and pilot ethnographic study (MRes data) |
| Autumn Term 2008 -Summer Term 2009 | Fieldwork |
| Autumn Term 2009 | Processing of data collected |
| Spring Term 2009 –Summer Term 2010 | Analysis; further fieldwork if necessary; writing up |

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