The Pleasures of Multiculturalism: How children learn better in multi-cultural classrooms

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ABSTRACT

This essay puts forward a view of citizenship that is embedded in the multi-culturalism of the classroom. The evidence presented comes from the author’s experiences as a student teacher of English in a girls’ comprehensive school in east London, but the argument for ‘the conviviality of multi-culturalism’ as a prerequisite for teaching and learning about citizenship goes beyond subject specialisms. The essay argues that it is the role of schools and teachers to be interested in and responsive to the different cultures that are present, and that the full benefits of an education in citizenship will be realised only when this happens.

PROLOGUE: A CONVERSATION

Let me start by describing a scene to you. We are in a classroom in a girls’ school in Hackney. It’s period two on a Friday morning, a time when some of the year 8 pupils come for an extra reading class to improve their English. There are three girls here today: Maria, from Portugal, Laila from Afghanistan and Dilek from Turkey (all names here and throughout the essay have been changed). They are sitting around a table by the window that looks out over the school playground and to the park beyond. All have copies of the book they are currently reading together, Refugee Boy by Benjamin Zephaniah, and we are taking it in turns to read out loud. Alison is their English as an additional language (EAL) teacher. I am reading.

Louisa: ‘The windows of the van were rolled down and six men in their early twenties began to shout ‘Go home!’ ‘Go and march in your own country!’ ’Pakis…’’

‘One of them spat in the direction of the demonstration. Some demonstrators broke away and began throwing stones at the van. The men in the van started throwing stones back and for a moment there was a mini riot. Alem and his father were surrounded by their supporters. They were both frightened and saddened that violence had broken out. A group of police officers moved in on foot to try to part the warring sides..’

Alison: (stops the reading, looks up) What’s a riot? Who knows what a riot is?

Maria: Is it a fight?

Alison: Yes, kind of like a fight but with lots of people. When people feel angry about something. What are they angry about here?
Laila: About Alem?
Alison: What about him?
Maria: Because they want to get rid of him and his family, and send them away.
Alison: What’s going to happen? What happens when there’s a riot?
Maria: The police are going to come
Laila: Lots of people will die.
Alison: Will lots of people die?
Laila: Yes.
Alison: What do you think Dilek?
Dilek: I think the police will come and beat people.

...Later on we are discussing the word ‘Carnival’

Alison: Has anyone been to a carnival before? What’s a carnival?
Maria: It’s a bit like a party. In Portugal, they have carnivals with flowers, all the children make flowers and they carry them and they walk around the streets. It’s really pretty.
Alison: Did you have flowers?
Maria: No, I haven’t been. I’ve seen it on television in Portugal. I’d like to go.
Dilek: I’ve been to one in Stoke Newington. I went with my Dad.
Alison: Oh yes, I know that one. Did you enjoy it?
Dilek: Yeah, it was good. There was music, and people dancing and shops and stuff like that.
Alison: Laila, have you been to a carnival?
Laila shakes her head.

Alison: Do they have carnivals in Afghanistan?
Laila: No. (Pause) I’ve been to one near the queen’s house.
Alison: Where was that? Near Buckingham Palace?
Laila: Yes, there was drums.
Alison: You could go to the Stoke Newington one, that’s near where you live isn’t it? Maybe you could ask your family. There’s a big carnival in London every summer, the Notting Hill Carnival. I don’t like it because it’s too crowded.

Louisa: Yes, I’ve been to it. There’s lots of music and all the people wear really colourful costumes and there’s a lot of dancing.

Maria: I like the costumes.

I have chosen to start my essay with this conversation because it illustrates many of the things that I want to discuss: the kind of learning that goes on between pupils; how meaning is constructed in a multi-lingual classroom; the importance of teachers’ attitudes to different cultures; the choice of texts; and the ways that pupils use their own experiences to find their way into texts and use texts as starting points for reflecting on those experiences. It also introduces Laila, Dilek and Maria who, alongside other pupils who you will meet in this essay, have illuminated and articulated what it’s like to be a pupil now in a comprehensive school in London, and the implications of this for teachers and schools.

INTRODUCTION

Where does citizenship come into all this? I am an English teacher, discussing pupils’ learning in English lessons. The starting point for this essay was not citizenship at all, but an interest in how the learning of the children I met was affected by their being in a multi-cultural classroom. This, I would argue, is central not only to English but also to Citizenship and education more broadly, particularly in the UK and particularly at this time. It is important to remember that citizenship is not something that is only learned in citizenship classes. Hackney Girls’ School (not the real name of the school) takes a cross-curricular approach to the subject, and there was a recent audit identifying citizenship being taught in subjects as diverse as music, art, science and maths. As an English teacher, I am interested here in how citizenship is ‘learnt’ within English lessons and how the two subjects can complement each other.

Broadly speaking, it is what the the National Curriculum for Citizenship says about ‘diversity’ that interests me. At Key Stage 3 (11 to 14 year-olds) the document states that ‘pupils should be taught about the diversity of national, regional, religious and ethnic identities in the United Kingdom and the need for mutual respect and understanding.’ (QCA, 1987). There are some problems with this statement. For example, what are the underlying assumptions here about what pupils themselves do and do not know about diversity? For the students in the classroom I describe, whose lives are lived in relation to diversity and difference of many kinds, it is surely worth starting with the resources they bring to the classroom and how these affect their learning. What can (mainly) white teachers teach their (often) multi-cultured students about diversity? I suggest that the National Curriculum statement needs to be turned on its head, to read: ‘children’s mutual respect (and experience) and understanding of the diversity of national, regional, religious and ethnic identities in the United Kingdom should inform teachers’ practice at every level,’ or that ‘teachers should learn that the diversity of national, regional, religious and...
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ethnic identities is not something apart from the lives of their pupils, and that pupils probably have as much to learn from each other about diversity as they do from their teachers.’ This is not to play down the role of teachers in fostering the kind of classroom culture where discussions about roles and responsibilities in relation to a developing understanding of ‘the citizen’ are productive; but the real question is not what children need to be taught so much as what schools and teachers need to understand about diversity, and about the particular groups of children whose lives are lived in and of diversity every day.

The essay breaks down into two sections. First, I will explore the importance of what Hatano calls ‘horizontal learning’ (Hatano, 1993) or what children learn from each other. Within this section, I will look at what pupils learn from sharing experiences with people from different backgrounds and how multi-lingual pupils can contribute to the construction of a different and more sophisticated understanding of language and meaning. Second, I will examine the importance of teachers’ attitudes to different cultures. I will look at how teachers can be responsive to different pupils and how this responsiveness is central to ‘the mutual respect and understanding’ that the National Curriculum for Citizenship specifies as part of the knowledge and understanding pupils ‘should be taught’.

The evidence I discuss is based on my experiences of teaching in a comprehensive girls’ school in east London, which for purposes of anonymity I will refer to as Hackney Girls’ School. At the centre of this essay, and central to the development of my ideas, are the conversations, writings and interactions of the pupils at this school. As I am mainly concerned with the social nature of learning, much of my evidence comes from discussions and remarks (rather than written work) that reveal something about the nature of multi-cultural education. Examples are drawn from lessons with several different pupils and classes: Laila, Dilek and Maria from the reading group for EAL pupils; a year 8 class working on a writing unit; and Valerie and some other year 9 pupils reading Anita & Me by Meera Syall. The range of evidence is intended to show the kind of multi-cultural learning that goes on in every classroom, and to explore ways that more could be made of this richness of experiences and backgrounds in all areas of the English and Citizenship curricula.

WHERE I’M COMING FROM

My interest in multi-cultural education stems not just from my recent teaching practice, but also from my own experiences of growing up and going to school in London. Being educated in a multi-ethnic Hackney school is something that I feel is central to my sense of who I am. I wanted to find out if this was true for other people, and to start to understand what the effects of being educated in a multi-cultural classroom might be. Paul Gilroy, in his book After Empire, talks about the ‘conviviality’ of multiculture. The idea that there is enjoyment in being in a place where people come from a diverse range of backgrounds is one that resonates strongly with me. I was also motivated by the lack of representation anywhere in the public sphere and the media of the ‘pleasures of multiculture’ (Gilroy, 2004) and in exploring how, in some small ways, a school might be a place where bridges might be built between the ‘ordinary multiculture’ (Gilroy, 2004) of everyday life and the overwhelming white-ness of British public and political institutions.
I am doubly privileged. Not only did I grow up in a comfortable middle-class household with lots of books and talk, but I was also lucky enough to go a school where I met people whose families came from many different parts of the world, spoke many different languages and, often, had totally different experiences from me. My education has been a multi-cultural one. I use the term carefully, understanding the disputed notion of ‘multi-culturalism’ which is regularly proclaimed to have failed. I feel I have gained many things from being educated in a multi-cultural school – some more tangible than others. Some of the things that I feel are the most important are: a strong sense of identity as someone who is part of a multi-ethnic world/ city; a different understanding of issues of equality and opportunity and racism; an interest in the complexity of language and meaning; and an exposure to varied texts and experiences.

Teaching in a multi-cultural classroom is a whole different matter. I have often had the feeling this year that I am missing something important: that there is a tremendous potential waiting to be tapped and I need some space to think about how you might begin to get at the special things about English in a multi-cultural classroom. In writing this essay and finding the space to reflect, I have realised, with some embarrassment, how little I really know about what goes on in my pupils’ lives outside school. Which is something to think about in the future.

SOME CONTEXT

In the following section, I give some information about the school in order to set the evidence in context and to give a broader picture of the pupils who attend. Hackney Girls’ School is a comprehensive school for girls aged 11 – 16, with around 900 pupils on roll. The catchment area includes parts of Hackney and Tower Hamlets both of which suffer from high levels of deprivation. Around 60% of pupils at Hackney Girls’ School are eligible for free school meals. Unlike some other schools in London, Hackney Girls’ School is not dominated by one major minority ethnic group but is genuinely mixed, with first, second and third generation immigrants. The EAL department estimate that around 140 pupils at Hackney Girls’ are refugees.

Thirty different languages are represented in the school and there are three major minority ethnic groups: Black British of Caribbean heritage (mainly from Barbados, Jamaica and Montserrat); Sylheti/ Bengali speakers from the Sylhet area of Bangladesh and Turkish/ Kurdish speaking pupils from Turkey. Many of these pupils were either born in England or came to England at a young age and attended English primary schools. They are often bilingual, or multilingual in many cases. Whilst this information can sound like a reel of statistics, it is important to locate the interactions I discuss within the broader framework of the school’s population. I place this account within a particular context – multi-lingual, multi-cultural, urban east London – and so the ‘recognition and celebration of diversity’ that is presented as an ‘objective’ in one of the Schemes of Work for Key Stage 3 work in Citizenship, must be seen in the context of particular classrooms and particular children if ‘recognition and celebration’ are to be more than empty rhetoric. Above all, what I want to suggest from this brief sketch is the tremendous potential within the school for children to learn from each other’s rich and various experiences.
‘HORIZONTAL’ LEARNING AND MULTILINGUALISM

Children learn lots from each other. Giyoo Hatano calls this peer-to-peer learning ‘horizontal learning’ (Hatano, 1993 p.154) and describes how children are more willing and able to contribute their ideas and knowledge when working with each other, than in ‘vertical learning’ interactions when pupils receive instruction from a teacher. He explains how:

… the less mature member in a vertical interaction is not highly motivated to construct knowledge, because he or she knows the other member possesses that knowledge. In contrast, during horizontal interaction, members’ motivation to disclose their own ideas tends to be natural and strong because no right answers are expected to come immediately.

(Hatano, 1993 p.156)

If we go back for a moment to the conversation between Laila, Dilek and Maria we can see how they are working together and pooling their experience by articulating their own ideas in order to try and understand the meaning of the words riot and carnival. In the discussion about carnival, Maria is the first to contribute what she knows - ‘it’s a bit like a party’ - and explains how she has seen carnivals on TV in Portugal. Building on Maria’s contribution, Dilek remembers a carnival that she has been to in Stoke Newington with ‘music, and people dancing and shops.’ Laila, the least confident of the three, has no experience of carnivals in Afghanistan, but now that the others have spoken, she feels able to contribute her experience of visiting a carnival near Buckingham Palace where ‘there was drums.’ Between them, and using their own experiences, the three girls are constructing a generalised understanding of the word carnival.

The thing to notice right away about this conversation is that the girls have not been given, nor are they really seeking, a definition of the word. Instead, they are testing how it is used in context and through this are gaining a sophisticated grasp of its meaning. After all, a definition does not tell you very much about a word. Vygotsky differentiates between the ‘sense’ or definition of a word and its ‘meaning’ - how it is used in social contexts (Vygotsky, 1934). Building on Vygotsky’s ideas, Bullock, in his 1975 report, describes a word as a ‘filing pin’ upon which the learner ‘stores successive experiences’ (Bullock, 1975). Put more simply, words only acquire meaning through use and for all learners, the most productive use begins and continues in social interactions.

What is the difference, then, between what is going on here and what would take place in a monolingual environment? I would argue that the there are two key differences. First, the actual meaning of the word is different. What you understand by the word carnival is different when you have heard about carnivals in Portugal and know that they don’t have carnivals in Afghanistan but they do in Stoke Newington. The pupils’ understanding of the word is more sophisticated precisely because they have all had different experiences, not in spite of it.
Second, group multilingualism – and by that I include both bilingual and monolingual pupils – gives children an understanding of the slipperiness and approximation of meaning in language which would be much harder to develop in a monolingual classroom. This enables a deeper understanding of the cultural assumptions embedded in language itself. It gives pupils, if not a meta-language, then at least a certain distance from the immediate use of language which enables them to reflect and, ultimately, to use and understand language in a more sophisticated way. Eve Gregory in City Literacies, an exploration of different models of learning in Tower Hamlets, provides evidence that ‘bilingual children have a more developed linguistic and social awareness as well as a cognitive and intellectual flexibility which exceeds that of their monolingual peers’ (2000 p6). With support for an environment where bilingualism is seen as ‘additive’ (Gregory and Williams, 2000 p6) and as an asset to all pupils’ learning, I would argue that this ‘linguistic and social awareness’ and ‘cognitive and intellectual flexibility’ can be extended to the whole class.

**SHARING EXPERIENCES**

Pupils sharing experiences with each other is not only useful in terms of understanding language, it is in itself valuable and important. Being able to bring their home life into school gives pupils a sense that their lives outside school are relevant and valued, and gives school a relevance to their life outside. Michael Rosen describes how ‘sharing culture and sharing personal experiences opens up the possibilities of cooperation, mutual respect and real friendships’ (1989 p26). Let me illustrate what I mean.

Valerie is a quiet but articulate pupil in year 9. She was one of the members of the year 9 reading group with whom I was reading *Anita and Me*. The notes that their regular teacher gave me when I started, read ‘Valerie doesn’t often contribute in class and I feel small group work will bring her out of her shell so to speak.’ The first few times we met, she spoke little unless questioned directly and volunteered little information about herself.

I had been meeting weekly for a number of weeks with the reading group. The format of the lessons was usually a re-cap and discussion of the chapter they had read at home, then more reading together followed by a discussion and predictions for what might happen next. After talking to the group about what they would like to read, I had chosen *Anita and Me* from their shortlist because I wanted to give these pupils an opportunity to relate their own experiences of growing up, often between different cultures, with Meera Syall’s 1960s adolescence. On this particular day, we were reading a passage where Meena (the 9-year old narrator) describes how a family party – which is normally strictly conducted indoors – leaks out to her front garden of the all-white Midlands village where she lives. She describes her emotions:

*It felt so strange to hear Punjabi under the stars. It was an indoor language to me, an almost guilty secret which the Elders would only share away from prying English eyes and ears... I hesitated on the porch step, unsure whether to flee indoors, dreading what the reaction of any passers-by might be, but also strangely drawn to this unfamiliar scene where my two worlds had collided and mingled so...*
easily. There was a whiff of defiance in the air and it smelled as sweet and as hopeful as freshly-mown grass.

(Anita and Me, Syall, 1997 p203-4)

Following this passage, Valerie said ‘that’s like me.’ I asked her to say more and she explained ‘at home with my family, I speak French, but outside with my friends I speak in English.’ The other pupils in the group became interested and started to ask Valerie about her family. She explained that she came from the Ivory Coast. She had moved first to France – where most of her family still lived, including her sisters - and then Britain. I got the feeling that this was the first time she had volunteered this information in school, and that she was surprised and pleased by the others’ interest in her family life.

Later in the term, I asked the group to write something about their families, a story or an incident that they wanted to share. Here is what Valerie wrote:

Sometimes when I go to France to visite [sic] my family, I am happy at the thought of it. but when I get to France and hear the people speaking French it makes me think back to England and the people speaking English. In a way when I go back to my neighbourhood in France and remember all my friends, it makes me think ‘why did I go to England. I had all my friends and family here and now I am lonely there.’ But then, when I come back to England and have all my friends around and laugh and I remember why I came.

Valerie wanted to write about her own life to share with her peers. She was able to start to bridge the gap between her private and public life. Not only was it important for Valerie to be able to talk about her family and start to work out how to locate herself in England and in the classroom, it was also important for other pupils to hear about Valerie’s life and how it was different from and similar to their own. Not having to carve up your life into sections is a view supported by the Bullock report which states that ‘no child should be expected to cast off the language and culture of the home as he crosses the school threshold, nor live and act as though school and home represent two totally different cultures which have to be kept separate’ (Bullock, 1975).

Tariq Modood goes one step further than this. He argues that not only should people be able to bring their experiences into institutions, but that the institutions themselves must be open to change by the people who participate in them. His model of multi-culturalism is one based on ‘equal dignity and equal respect’ (Modood, 2005) where equal dignity is a rights-based approach appealing to the established conventions (such as the American civil rights movement appealing to the American constitution) and equal respect is an attempt to open up public institutions to accommodate new values and cultures. He explains how the understandings and practices of any ‘public space’ or society develop historically and that they are a product of the traditionally dominant group. He describes how:

... when the subordinate groups claim equality within the society, they are claiming that they should not be marginal, subordinate or excluded: that they too – their values, norms and voice – should be part of the structuring of the public space.
Why, they ask, should we have our identities privatised, while the dominant group has its identity universalised in the public space?

(Modood, 2005 p64)

Meena’s experience in *Anita and Me* illustrates this point in a literally physical way and resonates with Valerie’s recognition of French as an ‘indoor language.’ But school is a place where identities need not be privatised. Through sharing experiences and valuing differences, pupils can acquire not just a sense of understanding but become participants in constructing a much richer and more genuinely educational experience.

Over the twelve weeks we met, the girls shared stories about themselves and their families that were new, not only to me, but also to each other. Nabila, born in Somalia and brought up in London wrote about the embarrassment of her Dad dancing in public; Aoife whose Irish roots betrayed themselves in her accent talked hesitantly of her Granny in Ireland; Megan told stories where her Welsh family played a much bigger role in her life than her Chinese one; Lisa made everyone laugh with stories of her white English family that were as interesting to the group as any of the others’ experiences. In important ways, these girls were starting to develop both a collective and an individual sense of their identities. Talking and writing about their experiences allowed them space to reflect on who they were. There is a danger of overstating the importance of such instances, but I would argue that by sharing experiences with each other, these pupils were developing their own thinking and attitudes from a position of mutual tolerance to the beginnings of mutual interest and understanding.

**ORDINARY MULTI-CULTURALISM**

Whilst sharing experiences can reveal difference, it can often also open up understandings of similarity. This sense of what is shared and what people have in common is almost more important than a sense of difference. Gilroy describes this commonality, explaining how ‘...in Britain, ‘race’ has become ordinary... white kids routinely speak patois and borrow strategically from Punjabi’ (2004 p144). This ordinariness is one of the pleasures of urban life and part of the ‘conviviality’ of *multi-culture* as distinct from *different cultures*. Gilroy argues convincingly that more should be made of ‘the conspicuous gains brought about by an unkempt, unruly and unplanned multiculture’ (2004). At Hackney Girls’ this ‘conviviality’ manifested itself in the kind of language pupils used together, when being young or old became much more of a defining factor in your identity than being Black or White. It could also be seen in clubs and after-school activities such as the ‘Hair Braiding Club’ and the ‘Nubian Queen Dancing Club’ which were run and attended by pupils of all backgrounds.

When I asked pupils in 8 Blue to tell each other stories about ‘When I had an accident’ it was the similarity of the incidents they described that was striking. This is not, of course, surprising in any way – children have similar accidents in similar ways. But the value for pupils of hearing about Abeo breaking her leg in Nigeria, or Anneisha and Shelly describing the same accident which happened when they went swimming together, or Laura...
deciding to write down Rahima’s story rather than her own because it was more interesting, is an understanding that what we share is significant. However, there is a danger of pretending that difference does not exist.

When Lorna Damms describes the dissenting voices of the pupils at her school as ‘reminders of an absence of homogeneity’ and warns against ‘the official pretence of a multicultural monoculture’ (2003, p11) she is perhaps reacting against the double-think of a government which on the one hand talks unproblematically about ‘diversity’ and publishes glossy brochures emblazoned with happy multi-cultural groups of children, and on the other supports a national curriculum designed to reinforce an appreciation of traditional (i.e. – white) ‘British values’ and spouts the xenophobic rhetoric of the ‘War on Terror’ and attacking Asylum Seekers. It is important to acknowledge that as long as there is racism there will be conflicts within the idea of multi-culturalism. Sharing experience can, in spite of this, provide the basis for an understanding that ‘human beings are ordinarily far more alike than they are unlike, that most of the time we can communicate with each other, and that the recognition of mutual worth, dignity and essential similarity imposes restrictions on how we can behave if we wish to act justly.’ (Gilroy, 2004 p4)

THE RESPONSIVE TEACHER

Respect is the most important thing. When you respect someone, and the person respect you, the way someone teach you is different.

Adenike, year 11

Of course, pupils do not learn from each other all by themselves. The role of the teacher is crucial for ‘really existing multiculturalism’ (Gilroy, 2004) to exist within the classroom. For children to materially benefit from being in a multi-cultural environment, teachers have to be interested in and adaptive to different cultures and backgrounds. But what does this actually mean? It means that the fact of being in a multi-cultural classroom itself is not enough. Proximity alone does not necessarily promote understanding or advance a more sophisticated understanding of language and literature. As Anne Phoenix says ‘mixed schooling is not guaranteed to produce any more familiarity and understanding between different ethnicities than it has done between genders’ (1998 p 93). ‘Differentiation’ to me does not cover it. It is about actively finding out about pupils and their lives, being interested and letting it have relevance to their English lessons. It means not getting the response from pupils such as the one I had from Gozde in year 10 who said ‘teachers never ask you what you do out of school.’ Teachers should ask.

This was reinforced to me when I attended a parents evening for the year 8 class I was teaching. Before that evening, I had seen Malice as an intelligent and hardworking pupil who was sometimes a little shy and quiet but who, on the whole, seemed to get something out of her English lessons. When we met her that evening, her regular teacher was discussing her vocabulary and how to increase it. She asked Sevgi if she knew a lot of words in Turkish. Suddenly Sevgi switched on like a light-bulb and said eagerly ‘Yes, yes, I know lots of words in Turkish.’ She went on to discuss enthusiastically with the teacher
ways that she might be able to use this knowledge to help her increase her vocabulary in English.

What an opportunity! What if Sevgi could have written in Turkish and then, with help from others translated it into English, or shared her work as it was with other Turkish-speaking pupils? Or taught the whole class some of the Turkish that she was an expert in? I realised that while Sevgi had been producing competent work in class it was far below the standard of what she was capable. Eve Gregory uses the metaphor of an ‘inheritance’ to describe the ‘resource or wealth which the inheritor brings to school and which can be used wisely or squandered according to advice given’ (Gregory, 1996 p45). Precisely because I had not asked, Sevgi had gone on producing what she thought I wanted – neatly laid out work with clear sentences and paragraphs. At no point had I explicitly invited her to bring her wealth of previous knowledge and educational experience to bear on what we were doing in the classroom.

Creating an environment where pupils feel able and willing to share their experiences is also a question of being flexible enough to take advantage of the unexpected opportunities. In one lesson on ‘dilemmas’ with the same class, I asked students to tell me about dilemmas that they had found themselves in. Most of them were like ‘Should I buy the pink top or the blue one?’ or ‘Should I go to this school or another one.’ In the middle of all this Essie said ‘Should I come to this country or another one?’ I wrote it up on the board along with the others, but afterwards, thought that this was probably Essie’s way of saying it was something that she wanted to talk about, or think about. I could have taken the opportunity to ask her to write about it or say more to the rest of the class about coming to Britain. Perhaps this is what Damms means when she comments that even when you’ve got a beautiful lesson plan that you’re damn well going to get through ‘the business of learning is all rather a lot more untidy than is convenient’ (Damms, 2003 p49).

CONCLUSIONS

The starting point for this essay was Gilroy’s model of the ‘conviviality’ of multi-culture and a sense that more could and should be made of its benefits. This conviviality need not remain outside school, but can be brought into the heart of classrooms and made central to pupils’ learning. Multi-cultural classrooms contain the potential to help pupils develop a sophisticated understanding of language and meaning, an awareness of alternative points of view and a critical and dialogic approach. They are places where pupils can experience literature from a range of different English-speaking cultures and develop a strong multi-cultural identity, a sense of solidarity and anti-racist attitudes. However, children will only be able to fully reap the benefits when teachers, schools and the curriculum are open and responsive. While multi-cultural classrooms are a necessary condition for the types of learning described to take place, they are not in themselves sufficient.

In the evidence described here, I have shown how pupils’ different backgrounds and cultures can be brought to the centre of their learning, and the benefits that occur when this happens. As teachers, we have an obligation to take an active and enquiring approach to our pupils’ lives and to ensure that our teaching is enriched by and changes according to the
different experiences, backgrounds and preoccupations of our pupils. Schools themselves must be open to change. They have the capacity to take a pioneering role in demonstrating the ‘alternative scenarios for the nation’s multicultural future’ that Gilroy says are possible ‘when routine features of vernacular conviviality enter into the mainstream of British culture’ (2004, p153). Multi-culturalism is no longer the experience of a minority of Britons: it lies at the heart of urban life. It is time that multi-culturalism was celebrated as one of the most exciting and positive aspects of British culture and brought to the heart of education, and of our practice as teachers of English, and of Citizenship, in London.

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