

# Whiteness and (Anti) Racism in Physical Education:

## A Professional Development Resource

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## *Acknowledgements*

We have developed this teaching resource to help educators address issues of whiteness and racism in physical education (PE) and sport by engaging with narratives and collective storytelling. It emanates from a research study with white English and Norwegian teachers and teacher educators, funded by the British Academy<sup>1</sup>, in which narratives were generated as a starting point for developing antiracist practice in PE. We share some of these stories in the hope that they might be useful for teaching about antiracist classrooms and inspire you and students to generate and critically reflect upon your own tales.

There is always a danger of oversimplifying complex theoretical issues in producing a modest resource such as this one. We urge readers to locate this work within the broader field of race and antiracism in education and PE and sport. To this end, we offer some starting points for useful literature but these recommendations are inevitably limited to the available space. We write from a critical pedagogical perspective and draw on critical whiteness studies. We perceive current race relations as being inequitable, and that integral to our work as educators, we have an ethical duty to challenge and disrupt structures that marginalise individuals on account of ethnicity. We recognise, however, that there exist alternative perspectives for antiracist work.

We would like to thank the teachers and teacher educators for sharing their stories as part of our study and for their permission to reproduce some of them here. Furthermore, we thank the British Academy for funding the research and our respective universities, Leeds Beckett and the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences, for enabling us to spend time on it.

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<sup>1</sup> Flintoff, A. and Dowling, F. (2014) **Teachers, Whiteness and Racism: Examining Physical Educators' Perspectives**, British Academy/Leverhulme Small Grant, SG131853.

## **Introduction**

Physical Education (PE) and Sports Science are recognised as being colonised white spaces. This is problematic given that education contexts are becoming increasingly ethnically diverse, not least in the light of the current global migrant crisis. The teaching resource aims, therefore, to provide teacher educators working in PE and Sport Science with tools for engaging with whiteness as an integral part of antiracist professional development. Specifically, it offers ways to focus upon how individual teacher identities (biographies) are constructed in everyday discourse and interwoven with teaching and learning in PE. It comprises of a selection of narratives stemming from a recent research project that looked at how white physical educators talk about their ethnic identities and how these influence their teaching. It provides ideas about how these narratives might be used in teaching in order to help student teachers reflect upon their own racialised identities and offers some recommended literature that can assist in analysing them with the view to developing antiracist pedagogies.

## **Why a focus on whiteness?**

Whiteness is a theoretical lens that acknowledges the shortcomings of previous race inequality perspectives that have tended to focus on 'the Other' (e.g. Muslim girls, black and minority ethnic students), ignoring the part that white teachers play in the racialisation of pedagogical spaces in PE. Hegemonic beliefs and practices about race tend to position whites as 'normal' and racially 'unmarked', and Others as 'deficit' and 'named'. Whiteness perspectives highlight that we are *all* positioned within race relations that exist in a given social and historical moment, distributing unequal access to power. Importantly, these relations are open to change which is a central aim of antiracist education. For example, discourses about 'naturally' talented, long distance black runners or the claimed lack of swimming ability amongst 'heavy-boned' black people can be challenged and restructured. Similarly, unfounded claims of white people's superior ability to administer global sports events or authoring PE curricula can be denounced.

## **Why narratives?**

We have chosen a narrative approach because story telling is fundamental to human meaning-making. We construct ourselves via the stories we tell. Individual and collective embodied experience is mediated and made 'real' via the linguistic shaping and telling of stories and the processes of their consumption. Narratives are inevitably relational. The teller and the 'listener' are active meaning-making agents, and 'small' or what we can call personal stories of race and ethnicity, are inevitably linked to 'big' or societal stories about race that are socio-economically and culturally situated. Narratives are inextricably imbued with power. Individuals in PE (students, teachers, teacher educators) have different access to racial narrative repertoires due to their differential life experiences and social positions (gender, ethnicity, disability, social class), and are also differentially positioned with regard to 'hearing' and interpreting stories.

With regard to race and antiracism, it is important to recognise the agentic possibility of learning to retell or re-story our experiences. Feminists and critical race theorists have long since recognised the potential for narratives to disrupt taken-for-granted social practises and evoke social change, as have critical pedagogues. By using new repertoires and by constructing so-called 'counter-narratives' of resistance that challenge repressive stories, race relations in PE can be reconfigured towards greater equity.

## Engaging with narratives in teacher education

Acknowledging that teaching is extremely personal, narratives about teacher selves (identities) can provide a starting point from which to unravel discourses about beliefs and attitudes of race and ethnicity, and how these affect teaching in PE. It is possible to design sessions about (anti)racist PE teaching by critically reflecting upon everyday tales as told and heard (interpreted by listeners), as well as critically deconstructing such tales in the light of different theoretical perspectives. To this end, we offer some examples of everyday narratives, the themes of which can be replicated by student teachers, as well as providing recommended literature to assist in the theoretical analysis of such stories. It is important that the questions used to generate narratives with your students are appropriately tailored to your particular context (e.g. it is unlikely that your groups will be all white as was the case with our participants; Flintoff (2012) includes some narratives about black and minority ethnic students' experiences of PE).

When participating in collective storysharing, it is vital that participants establish a set of ethical ground rules. Mutual respect is of utmost importance, especially when people do not share similar viewpoints. Individuals' anonymity should also be guaranteed – unless explicit permission is given, personal stories shared in teaching sessions are not to be retold beyond that particular setting. Recounting, telling and listening to stories can be very emotional, so keep this in mind, too. Talking about racism and whiteness can be met by hostility and resistance so teacher educators ought to provide sufficient time to explore these issues (i.e. to address such matters over weeks rather than in one-off sessions). Following recommendations from the Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice at the University of Nottingham<sup>2</sup> it is worth keeping in mind that:

- Every individual brings valid and legitimate knowledge constructed in their own contexts
- All knowledge is partial and incomplete
- All knowledge can be questioned

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<sup>2</sup> Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice (2016) *Open Spaces for Dialogue and Enquiry*. Available at: <http://www.osdemethodology.org.uk/> (Accessed: 12 April 2016).

## Working with students to construct their own narratives about experiences of whiteness, race and (anti)racism

### Exercise 1: Generating stories about whiteness, race and (anti)racism

Try to write a short story in response to the memory triggers below. Keep in mind the following advice when recalling and writing your memories about experiences to do with race and ethnicity:

- Try to let your thoughts flow! Try, too, to remember how experiences/episodes felt! Embodied memories. What emotions do you associate with the incident? Who influenced your feelings? Can you still sense (smell, hear) the setting today?
- If you like, you may use an object or a photograph from which to tell your memory (bring it to our session, too!).
- The memory does *not* have to be from a PE or sport context.
- If the story/memory is long, concentrate on one aspect of it.
- There are no 'right' answers, only experiences and incidents.
- The tales can be as short as a few lines or several pages long.

- 1) What's your first memory of your ethnicity?
- 2) Write a story about when you first became aware of the idea of race.
- 3) Write a story about when you first became aware of being white [black/minority ethnic].
- 4) Can you tell a story about race and/or racism from your childhood and the local environment in which you grew up?
- 5) Can you tell a tale about teaching black and minority ethnic students?
- 6) Do you have a story about racism in school where you teach/have taught?
- 7) Write a story about your experiences of teaching students about race and racism?
- 8) Do you have a story about working collaboratively with colleagues (white and black and minority ethnic) about race and racism? (e.g. writing a school policy; dealing with a racist incident)
- 9) Can you share a story about how whiteness has played a role in your work as a teacher?
- 10) Can you write about a memory from being British/English/Norwegian? [our study was located in England and Norway; amend as appropriate]

## **Exercise 2: Sharing and retelling stories in order to dismantle them**

Ask students to read some appropriate literature about whiteness, race and (anti)racism. You will find some suggestions for further reading at the end of this resource, including a selection of research articles and appropriate books.

Ask the students to establish groups of 4-5 in which they will read aloud some of their personal stories to each other. Ask them to discuss these in relation to the collective storysharing (i.e. each others' narratives), as well as the theoretical lenses gleaned from the literature.

They might find the following questions helpful to facilitate reflection:

What's the story about?

Who's the main character? Who has supporting roles?

In what context(s) is the story played out?

Why do things turn out the way they do?

What are the consequences, and for whom?

Combining the generation of personal stories about whiteness and race with a range of theoretical perspectives, students can be encouraged:

To develop critical engagement with different perspectives of race – what are the limitations/implications of each perspective?

To develop informed thinking – what are the dominant views of race? Why are they dominant? Where can I find out more about this?

To ask reflexive questions – what do I think about this and why? How will my views affect my teaching in PE?

To pursue group dialogue – what are the key tensions in ideas about race and PE? What do fellow student teachers think?

To make responsible choices – to ask what it has to do with them personally and professionally? How do I act upon this knowledge?

## Narratives about whiteness, race and (anti)racism

### Story 1:

Growing up in a small town I was never exposed to different ethnicities. When I was about 6, or 7, I moved to [northern city] with my mum. So in order to see my dad, he came and picked me up on a weekend to stay with him...I would often talk about my week at school and what I got up to in my spare time. I remember speaking about the black family, who lived over the road from me, and how I was making friends and we would play football together. My dad's response was to say 'you don't want to be friends with them son. It's like those Asians, they have all the corner shops and drive all the taxis. If they came to [town in North of England] we would just kick them all out'. I never thought of my dad as racist, but he had just a lack of knowledge of the different cultures because he may have not been exposed to different ethnic origins.  
(George<sup>3</sup>, English teacher)

### Story 2:

When I started school there weren't many immigrants, just whites ... but in the course of the 6 years I was at primary school they arrived. I'm talking about the beginning of the 1980s ... I remember all the stereotypes that circulated.

... I'd never met a person from Pakistan, nor a Turk ...and it became very much of a 'them' and 'us' thing ...There was some fighting, that sort of thing. A group of Turks made a particular impression on me. They were never with us. There was a distinct division in the playground between the Norwegians and the Others. But it's a long time ago and I can't really recall that much, other than it was all very separate. We thought they were very different from us. I remember I was unsure of them and perhaps a little scared.

... They spoke a different language and they behaved differently. They really did! And I remember you could be a bit afraid of 'those boys' if you said something wrong and the like...there was a type of gang mentality.

(Tord, Norwegian PE teacher)

<sup>3</sup> All names in our narratives are pseudonyms

### Story 3:

I went travelling by myself and on a particular day I wanted to get out of the really touristy area of Lima (Peru), so I went into the city centre and ended up getting lost and in an area that I felt ... was a really dodgy area because...it was literally me and everyone else was just locals and it was just...it was manically busy. It was just...I felt completely out of place and I just felt...I just hated being stared at because all faces were on me, like what is she doing here, she's just wandered into the wrong area.

And that was the only time really that I can honestly say, 'Oh my gosh, my skin colour, I really wish that... or I'm not fitting in here at all,' and I was really conscious of it in that particular situation. Definitely, it's only been going to other countries, sort of like non-western, and where my skin colour does stand out as being different to them, when I've really felt myself as being different and white because of skin colour.

Because, like I said, there's been sort of no exposure in my life at all; primary, secondary school, even university wasn't an ethnically diverse university that I went to. So it was only really through being taught about ethnicity and sport participation and teaching myself subsequently that I've really thought about it in any way, shape or form...and even now I'm working at a university that isn't an ethnically diverse university.

(Janet, English teacher educator)

#### **Story 4:**

I started my little book of records back in 1978, when I first started running at the tender age of 14, and I'm still continuing it now...And I guess, as a sprinter, doing a number of leagues and national league etc, it took us all around the country and it was...certainly at the national championships etc, there were a lot of African-Caribbean ethnic groups. And, to be honest, as a white person, to win any race, was, you know, outstanding but to beat somebody who was black was even more rewarding... [I felt] a greater pleasure than beating my fellow white people. I suppose there's the stereotype that ethnic...you know, African-Caribbean groups are...naturally good at sprinting.  
(Mary, English teacher educator).

#### **Story 5:**

Bob and Jack, two white British students, and Salim, a British Asian student, are sat around a table in a sport sociology seminar. I walk over. "So, tell me," looking at the whole group, "how do you think race has affected your own sport engagement?"

Bob turns to his left. "Salim?"

There is a second of silence.

It is the answer I anticipated and dreaded at the same time, yet it still deflates me.

It is only Salim who can answer, only Salim whose experiences have been shaped by his race, his visible Asian racial identity, his visible difference to Bob, whose white skin means nothing, does not signify a racial identity at all, and can have had no impact on his access to sport or his experiences when playing.

(Josie, English teacher educator)

## Story 6:

Simen: Well, it's up to the individual teacher... you're meant to have activities that reflect the students etc ... but what's *actually* written in the curriculum, well, there's nothing more than a reference to dance from other cultures (interrupted)

Tord: No, there's the possibility to choose sports that are ... that are more central to other countries' cultures, like cricket which is really big in India... but I've never taught it. Table tennis is really big in Asia but I've never taught that, either. So there's room, it's possible, but ....

Simen: No, we don't think like that. I think about the principle of 'fair play' - that is claimed to provide lots of possibilities. And it provides room for... inclusion and making sure that all have a chance to take part...

Vetle: I try at the same time to be a bit conscious about it (youngsters with different backgrounds)... we try to avoid the main team games and offer instead a broad spectrum of activities... be a little flexible

Simen: Is it possible, though, to let them down if the aim is integration and assimilation? Isn't school meant to offer and teach skiing? Isn't that a desired goal? After all, that's what Norwegians do!

Fiona: Well, it comes back to the question of what educational vision you have, I suppose. Does it value assimilation or does it valorise difference and a multicultural society?

Vetle: If they're going to learn to ski then the school needs to purchase the equipment, I'd say! (laughter)

Tord: If I might digress a little. When you asked earlier about how my Whiteness might have affected my teaching and I responded that I didn't think I could share a story. Well, all I can say now is that what we're talking about here, the choice of sports, etc, it's influenced by your cultural background, the fact I'm white and Norwegian. Because it really is to a large degree, you can't get around it. ... I teach a lot of the activities I grew up with, that have been a part of my childhood and upbringing.

(Tord, Norwegian PE teacher; Vetle, Norwegian PE teacher; Simen, Norwegian PE teacher; Fiona, teacher educator)

## Selected further reading

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