

They Struggled Here

Bearing witness, telling tales



Begin at the beginning, runs that famous and apparently sensible advice in *Alice in Wonderland* about the construction of stories, and then go on to the end. Then stop.

But what if the date of the beginning is disputed, and if the end has not yet happened, and the future not yet foreseeable? And if events in the present keep demanding revisiting, reordering and reinterpreting the past, such that the beginning, middle and end of a tale all sort of get mixed and jumbled up?

And what if the narrator is unreliable, whether unconsciously or deliberately, or is suspected of being unreliable, with an axe to grind or old scores to settle?

It is the famous advice then that seems to belong to wonderland, not to the story itself.

The story to be told here is about the creation and then destruction of a project in the education system of a London borough in the late 1980s.

One day, perhaps, the full story will be told. Warts and all, blow by blow. There will be multiple viewpoints and broad perspectives. Secrets will be told. There will be generous and frank self-criticism, and humble confession and contrition from everyone involved, whether as combatants or onlookers, and whatever their take and point of view. Every intricate complexity will be unpicked, there will be no more economy with the truth, there will be judicious apportioning of responsibility and blame. The respective roles of conscious intent and sheer or rotten luck will be gravely judged. Demons and villains will perhaps be forgiven and redeemed, and perhaps all passion and anger will be spent. One day, perhaps.

In the meanwhile, there is this account.

It's a story, is this, of defeat and destruction. Such stories can be, of course, merely depressing and demoralising, merely moans and laments. But also they can recall the dignity and importance of struggling for certain values, certain ideals, and they can portray, commend and celebrate the values and ideals themselves. They recall then and thus the dignity of recollection, of storytelling, the dignity of bearing witness, of telling the tale.

In many African countries and cultures a tale is told of defeat and dignity involving a tortoise, or some other similarly weak and slow creature, and a fierce predator, for

example a lion or a leopard. The following example is from a telling by Chinua Achebe:

Once upon a time the leopard, who had been trying for a long time to catch the tortoise, finally chanced upon him on a solitary road. 'Aha!' he said. 'At last! Prepare to die.' And the tortoise said: 'Can I ask one favour before you kill me?' The leopard saw no harm in that and agreed. 'Give me a few moments to prepare my mind,' the tortoise said. Again the leopard saw no harm in that and granted it.

But instead of standing still, as the leopard expected, the tortoise went into strange actions on the road, scratching with hands and feet and throwing sand in all directions. 'Why are you doing that?' asked the puzzled leopard.

The tortoise replied: 'Because even after I have died I would want anyone passing this spot to say yes, a fellow and his match struggled here.'

The Development Programme for Race Equality (DPRE) was designed in the London Borough of Brent during June and July 1986, following the local government elections of May 1986 at which the Labour Party in Brent had been returned with a decisive majority. The programme's formal statement of aims ran as follows: **'to enable schools to develop methodologies, structures and curricula which will improve the attainment and life-chances of Black pupils, and thereby create greater race equality'**.

Amongst many other things the programme occasionally entailed telling and enjoying the tale of the leopard and the tortoise. It was used to explore the conventions and purposes of storytelling, both oral and written, and the role of story in situations of unequal power, for example in relation to colonialism in the past and to the daily lives of pupils and students in schools in the present.

The detailed design of the DPRE reflected the belief that the promotion of race equality in schools requires three main kinds of change and development. These overlap with each other and influence and interact with each other. The three were summarised in early documents in these terms:

curriculum development: new subject-matter, topics and materials, and new practical methods and approaches

staff development: new perspectives, skills and expectations amongst teachers, both as individuals and as teams, groups, departments and whole staffs

organisational development: new practices, procedures and customs in decision-making, and in relationships between schools and their local communities.

The posts in the DPRE were advertised in the national press in early September 1986, and interviews were held in the first half of October. Fifty-five appointments were made, of which 52 were of teachers and three for clerical and administrative support. The starting date for the programme was January 1987.



It was on Sunday 19 October 1986 that the world at large began to hear about the project. The information that was reported, however, was extremely distorted, inaccurate and emotive. RACE SPIES SHOCK was the front page banner headline in the Mail on Sunday, and the front page story beneath it began as follows:

Race commissars in a Left-wing borough are recruiting 180 Thought Police to patrol schools for prejudice. Brent plans to put a race adviser in every school from January.

They will be backed by project teams who will move in at the first hint of prejudice. The 180 advisers will have the power to interfere in every aspect of school life, from discipline to the curriculum.

And they will be paid out of a £5 million Government grant intended to promote racial harmony.

On the following days, the Mail on Sunday story was repeated frequently by its daily sister paper, and by several other national papers as well. Headlines included:

CASHIER THESE COMMISSARS
THE FORCE THAT DRIVES THE TROTS
SPIES IN CLASS TO SPY ON SIR
SAVE US FROM THIS EPIDEMIC OF NITWITS
RACE SPIES LIKE THE DAYS OF HITLER
THE MOST EVIL FORCE IN BRITAIN

The recurring subliminal imagery was of East European authoritarianism, an evil and alien empire taking shape only a taxi ride from Fleet Street. What was particularly sinister and alarming about Brent, several papers said or hinted, was that many of its elected councillors, and some of its senior officers, were of South Asian or Black heritage. This meant that whilst certain other left-wing London boroughs were at worst no more than 'loony-left', the members and officers in Brent were *evil*.

For example, a cartoon in the Daily Mirror portrayed Brent Town Hall as a Native American tepee (a 'wigwam') and Brent councillors and senior officers as half-naked

savages brandishing spears and tomawawks, and dancing in heathen ecstasy round a white sacrificial victim tied to a post. An editorial in the Daily Telegraph declared:

It is unpleasant and potentially dangerous for central government to override democratically elected local authorities. But as the Government watches the race relations policies of Brent Council proceeding from the absurd to the evil, it may feel that it has no choice but to act ... This action by Brent, which will lead to the indoctrination of children, the loss of good teachers, the lowering of standards and the subversion of the British educational ethos throughout an entire London borough, signifies that enough is enough ... Mr Baker, the Education Secretary, cannot allow this to go on. (20 October 1986)

An anonymous letter sent to the borough's chief inspector ran as follows. The original spellings, terms and punctuation are left here uncorrected and uncensored.

You must be out of your tiny little mind you silly bastard if you are going to send niggers round to my kids school to scare them, you are in for a lot of trouble. Is this scheme to spy on our kids, my kids hate the black bastards so do their Mum and Dad and you and your spies will not alter that you cunt, So our rates are being used to keep a bunch of niggers in Luxury send them back to Bongo Bongo Land, which is their real home and let our country start smelling sweet again. We did not know what muggings, rapes, drugs, looting of shops etc were until the gollywogs arrived here by the way my kids are reading all about Uncle Toms Cabin and all the other childrens books you call racist.

'Eat up your greens,' said a parent to a child in a cartoon in The Guardian, 'or Brent Council will get you.' In the climate of fear and uncertainty stirred by alarmist and untrue headlines in the press, and exacerbated locally in Brent by central government's announcement that it would withhold funding for the programme until and unless it was clear that its aims were being achieved, the DPRE began operating in early January 1987. But a few months later Brent's newly appointed director of education confidently invited the Home Office (the central government department responsible for funding the programme) and Her Majesty's Inspectorate (the unit in central government responsible at that time for evaluating the quality of education in England) to send representatives to judge for themselves whether satisfactory progress was being made, and whether funding for the programme should accordingly now be released.

Even if they had not been formally invited these two government departments would no doubt have sent representatives to Brent to see for themselves how things were going. The Home Office sent Sir David Lane, a former Home Office minister, and the Inspectorate assembled a large team of inspectors who between them had a great deal of relevant professional experience and expertise.

Lane (1922–1998) was a Conservative Party politician. Educated at Eton College, Trinity College Cambridge with a double first in classics, and at Yale School of Business Studies, he was elected to Parliament in 1967 as MP for Cambridge, 1967–76, and was parliamentary under-secretary of state at the Home Office, 1972–74. He was then the first chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), 1977–82.

His report for the Home Office in 1998 on Brent's development programme for race equality contained the following judgements:

'The DPRE teachers are in no sense spies. But are seeking to play their proper role as catalysts and stimulators of new ideas and practices.'

'Brent deserves praise for giving high priority, more than most authorities, to tackling racism and discrimination.'

'A broad and novel scheme.'

'The great majority of my informants in Brent approve of the scheme and want it to continue and succeed.'

'More local authorities should join Brent in giving higher priority to this aspect of their educational provision, and the Brent scheme, if it proves itself, could well be a model for application elsewhere.'

The report of the team of inspectors sent by the Department for Education contained the following judgements:

'DPRE teachers have overall been welcomed in the schools in which they work, and many positive comments were made by heads and other staff about their contributions.'

'All DPRE staff are responsible, directly or indirectly, to the heads of schools. Overall this is a satisfactory system of management. It took a great deal of time to negotiate lines of management responsibility, but they appear to be satisfactorily established and working well.'

'An important contribution of DPRE was that of experienced professionals committed to teaching and learning methods in the school.'

There were many other positive comments along similar lines. Absolutely none of these positive comments were quoted by the papers which had misrepresented and demonised the programme when it was first set up. The Daily Mail, on the contrary, repeated verbatim its earlier untrue statement that DPRE staff were working as spies, despite Sir David Lane's explicit statement: 'The DPRE teachers are in no sense spies.'

Nor, less surprisingly but just as dishonestly and in the long run perhaps even more damagingly, the newspapers in question did not quote Sir David Lane's considered judgement that the original press reportage and behaviour in relation to the DPRE had been 'outrageous' and 'disgraceful'.

Apparently disappointed by the failure of Lane and Her Majesty's inspectors to find fault with the DPRE, and by their emphatic conclusion that the government should no longer withhold funding for this 'broad and novel scheme', the Home Office set up yet a further panel of inquiry. As the leader for this it chose Baroness Caroline Cox. She knew Brent well, particularly in the north of the borough, and nationally she was an active member of New Right projects such as, amongst others, the Conservative Philosophy Group, the Centre for Policy Studies, the Hillgate Group and the Gatestone

Institute. Her panel's report on the DPRE came to much the same conclusion as Sir David Lane and Her Majesty's inspectors. However, the Daily Mail's account of the report by Baroness Cox was as follows:

A Labour plan to place 'race spies' in schools to give black youngsters a better deal may now be scrapped. The scheme of Brent, in North London, employed 'blinkered and insensitive zealots' according to a Government-backed inquiry led by educationist Baroness Cox.

This item drew a personal letter from Baroness Cox to Sir David English, the editor of the Daily Mail. She wrote:

I was deeply disturbed by the grossly inaccurate account ... about the work of the Monitoring Panel ... of which I am Chairman. The Daily Mail attributed the phrase 'blinkered and insensitive zealots' to the Monitoring Panel. The report that we have made makes no such statement or anything resembling it ... The Report nowhere contains the words quoted or anything like them.

This letter reflected well on the fair-mindedness, integrity and objectivity of its author, and of the members of the monitoring panel which she had chaired on behalf of the Home Office. Her report was too late, however, to save the DPRE. At least, however, it at long last enabled the Home Office to retrospectively release funding for the programme.

The final destruction of the DPRE came in summer 1990 when Brent Council, now under Conservative control, axed the programme without a formal report on the matter, and without a public record of debate and rationale. This came as a shock to many people. Yet also it was entirely predictable, in view of the way the DPRE had been treated by critics and opponents from its very first days. It had been all but strangled at birth by the Race Spies hysteria, and it was perhaps inevitable that it would be killed off in a casual and brutal way, with scant regard for the normal rules and customs of informed debate and rational decision-making.

The values, concepts and ideals underlying the programme were not, however, so easily killed off. The key ideas and ideals animating the DPRE were expressed in the opening words of the borough's 1987 curriculum statement, *Equality and Excellence*, reprinted and redistributed in 1994. They were and are a succinct and bold reminder of what the DPRE was all about, and why it was inevitably met in some quarters by hostility and opposition:

'All learners are of equal value and have unlimited potential for development.'

'There is inequality in wider society. The education service has a vital role to play in helping to combat, reduce and eliminate inequality and unjust discrimination, and in improving the opportunities, achievements and life-changes of all learners.'

Amongst many other things, the DPRE involved enabling pupils and students to describe their own experiences of living in unequal Britain, and their own individual and collective endeavours to create strong and dignified personal identities. As part of a unit of work at a secondary school, a student wrote a poem which began as follows:

Oi! Paki! Wotcha doin' in our country?
I hold up my head high and proud
And walk on with dignity.
How long can I walk on?
How long can I ignore?
The anger inside me burns red, dark red.
How I'd like to tear them apart,
But instead I hold my anger.

The attacks on the DPRE were similar, in their effects and motivation, on the attacks made on that young person. The long-term task is to educate against, and to eradicate, racial harassment and abuse, within the wider political task of building and maintaining a society in which all people can — as the poem puts it — hold up their heads high and proud, and walk with dignity.

These are tasks in the outer world. In the immediate short term, one task amongst others is in the inner world. It is to hold the anger: to acknowledge and name one's feelings ('How I'd like to tear them apart'), but not to be broken by them. And to walk, describe and narrate — bear witness, tell tales with dignity.

I want it to be known, said the tortoise in the folktale, that people struggled here.

Remembering and marking the struggle is one side, but only one side, of the coin. The other is to hope. The sense of boundless possibilities and confidence at the start of *Equality and Excellence* — 'All learners are of equal value and have unlimited potential for development' — was expressed well in a brief poem written by a child at a local primary school just over the road from Brent Town Hall, in summer 1990:

I am rich and pure and full of fresh thoughts
Ready to take on the world
I'm full of action
Smart as anything
And full of quality
I am an egg ready to hatch.
I bring with me life.

That, yes, was what it was all about. It was for the sake of unlimited potential — hope, fresh thoughts, action, life — that they struggled here.



Source: This essay consists of lightly edited extracts from two articles by Robin Richardson first published respectively in 1991 and 1996: 'LEA Race Policies Under Attack: case studies for the 1990s' in B. Mayor and D. Gill, eds, *Policies in Race and Education: structures and strategies*, Maidenhead: Open University Press, 1991, pp 134-150 and 'They struggled here: bearing witness and telling tales' in *Fortunes and Fables: education for hope in troubled times*, Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books, 1996, pp 149-168.

Notes

The quotation about the tortoise and the leopard is from *Anthills of the Savannah* by Chinua Achebe, Heinemann African Writers Series, 1987, page 128.

As mentioned in the text quotations from the press in October 1986 are from papers dated 19 or 20 October.

The Lane report was entitled *Brent's Development Programme for Racial Equality in Schools, a report by Sir David Lane* and published by the Home Office in April 1988.

The report by HMI was entitled *The Development Programme for Race Equality in Brent* and published by the Department for Education and Science, reference INS56/12/227, 198/88, DSI1/88.

The poem starting 'Oi, wotcha doin' in our country?' was by a student at Willesden High School and appeared in a compilation published by the DPRE entitled *Drum, Talk and Dub*, 1990.

The poem starting 'I am rich and pure' was published in a local compilation edited by Steven Delsol, *Children's Self Worth Poems*, Brent Education Department, 1990. The author was a pupil at Chalkhill Junior School, Wembley.