Culture and Identity

Worksheet 4.2: Ethnicity & National Identity

Read the following passage and answer the questions that follow

The Commission for Racial Equality commissioned a survey on race relations in the UK in 2006, which included research on attitudes towards nationality and identity among all ethnic groups.

The findings showed an English identity was regarded by many ethnic minority people as an exclusively white identity and ethnic minorities were therefore more likely to adopt a British than an English identity. A British identity was preferred as it was considered to be more inclusive and people felt it could include elements of ethnic minority culture. For many respondents from ethnic minorities, their rejection of an English identity was driven by experiences of discrimination and they felt it would be difficult to adopt an English identity even if they wanted to as many white people did not regard them as English. As two minority ethnic survey participants from London put it, '*I don't think that you can adopt a culture or adopt a nationality when English people will never see you as English if you've got black skin, never*', and '*Well, a lot of people ask me, where are you from? I'd say, I'm English…and I usually get, yeah, but where are you really from?*'

Britishness was not linked with being white in the same way that Englishness was, with large majorities of people in all ethnic groups rejecting any such link.

Some people from ethnic minority groups felt they had multiple identities, with their identity made up of their ethnicity and where they lived, as well as their Britishness. Identity was not fixed for many ethnic minorities and many had a dual identity, which meant adopting one identity in private and personal situations, and a different identity in public situations. For example, some ethnic minority participants felt that their ethnic identity was strongest when they were at home with family or in the area where they lived, while their British identity was dominant at work or school, or when socializing with white friends. One Asian male in the survey commented that '*I think when I was a kid it was a complete divide in the middle. Half the day I was Asian and half the day I was British*'.
Some ethnic minority participants, especially mixed-race participants, felt that the complexity of their identity was often not recognized. For example, a person may be seen as black when this is not how they identify themselves, or it is only one part of their identity. As one black person put it, '*I'm a mix of a lot of different things, but because I'm black people just think, "Oh, he's just black" and … that's that*'.

Although there was widespread agreement that Britishness is not defined by ethnicity, the research showed that there was no consensus about what Britishness consisted of, and any attempts to spell out and build a clear common British identity risked alienating some people from ethnic minorities who resented the implication that they needed to be told how to be British. As a female Asian from Birmingham put it, '*Everyone's telling us to be British but we didn't think we had to adopt it. I thought we were it*'.

Adapted from *Race Relations 2006: A Research Study*, Commission for Racial Equality, 2007. The full report is available online from the Equality and Human Rights Commission at www.equalityhumanrights.com/

Culture and Identity

Worksheet 4.2:
Ethnicity & National Identity

Questions

1. Identify and explain three reasons why people from minority ethnic groups are more likely to identify themselves as British rather than as English.

2. Using material from the passage and your own ideas, suggest reasons, with examples, why people from minority ethnic groups:

a) often feel they have multiple identities

b) sometimes find it difficult to assert identities other than their ethnicity

3. Suggest reasons why individuals from minority ethnic groups might develop dual identities, '...adopting one identity in private and personal situations, and a different identity in public situations'.

4. Using material from the passage and your own ideas, suggest reasons why there might be difficulties in developing courses in schools or television programmes to help build a British identity.