**Helping mixed heritage children develop ‘character and resilience’ in schools.**

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**Abstract**

Recent UK government policy suggests that all schools have a key role to play in building ‘character and resilience’ in children. This article draws on data from a wider research project, exploring the school experiences of mixed white/ black Caribbean and mixed white/ black African children in two London secondary schools. Because data from this project suggest that many children experienced adversity at school, a theoretical framework previously developed by Ungar et al. (2007) was used to assess how they coped with adversity and to what extent their schools supported them with it. Findings revealed that although positive relationships with adults were essential, teachers could not offer the necessary support and guidance because they were unaware of mixed heritage children’s needs, and any challenges they faced. This article asks whether such a framework might prove useful in supporting teachers to understand what factors develop ‘character and resilience’ and the ways in which they might therefore support children to cope.

**Keywords**

Mixed heritage, adversity, resilience, discrimination

**Introduction**

A recent All Party Parliamentary group’s ‘Character and Resilience’ manifesto (February 2014) suggests that all schools have a key role to play in building ‘character and resilience’ amongst their pupils. The desire that all pupils leave school fully rounded and better equipped to meet the challenges of employment and future life forms part of the manifesto’s ‘core mission to deliver social justice’. Whilst actions to nurture children’s self -esteem, perseverance and their ability to bounce back from setbacks should be universal, actions are expected to be targeted with greatest intensity at those most in need through poverty and disadvantage. Positive relationships with adults in school who can offer support and guidance are seen as paramount, especially for those who lack supportive family relationships.

However, existing research into the experiences that children of mixed heritage have in schools, suggests that many adults do not understand their needs, and any challenges that they might face (Edwards et al. 2008; Mirza 2008; Wardle 2004; Williams 2009). Many children suffer discrimination because of their skin colour. Many are also vulnerable to teachers’ inaccurate perceptions about their home lives and they do not have their mixed heritage identities recognised. This remains the case despite the fact that the 2011 Census suggests 1.2 million people now claim to have a mixed background, making them the fastest growing ethnic minority group in British society.

This article explores which factors are deemed necessary in supporting mixed heritage children cope with the various challenges they face, and asks what role schools play in supporting them. The article draws on data from a wider research project, which explored the experiences mixed white/ black Caribbean and white/ black African children had in two London secondary schools. Using qualitative interviews to gather the perspectives of these children, their parents and teachers, the research revealed various ways in which they suffered adversity; these are explored later in this article.

In order to understand factors that supported mixed heritage children to cope, a theoretical framework, designed by Ungar et al. (2007) was used. This framework outlines factors that supported the young people in their research to cope with challenges such as poverty, family breakdown and discrimination based on race, gender and sexual orientation. Ungar et al. (2007) used the term ‘resilience’ to describe how individuals develop the capacity to cope with adversity. They suggest that it is not just the capacity of individuals to cope with adversity, but also the capacity of their communities to provide them with the resources necessary to deal with it. Their definition of resilience moves beyond a focus on the individual, to a more ecological phenomenon where resilience is developed through individuals’ interactions with their environments, their schools, families, neighbourhoods, and the larger community (Brooks 2006).

Yet there are limitations to this approach. Research has argued that environments may contribute to the challenges that individuals face, as well as potentially supporting them (Brooks 2006). Aisenberg et al. (2008) suggest that children who consistently witness violence in their communities are at increased risk of substance abuse, internalising behaviours and psychological problems such as anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress. Meanwhile Jaegar et al. (2008) highlight that individuals sometimes need protection from the pressure that communities exert over them. Writing about the prevention of Female Genital Mutilation in the West, they describe the psychological pressure faced by many girls who are torn apart by conflicts of loyalty between their families, their cultures of origin and their migrant communities who may believe female genital mutilation a necessary condition to be regarded as a true woman.

This aside, the focus of this article is to explore the factors that support children to overcome adversity, and to what extent their schools, as communities, supported them. It goes on to ask whether a framework such as Ungar et al.’s (2007) might prove a useful tool for teachers, to both understand the challenges children face and the factors necessary in coping with them.

*Challenges in mixed heritage children’s lives*

Existing research suggests mixed heritage children experience adversity whilst at school. Williams (2009) suggests that there is confusion surrounding the classification of mixed heritage individuals. Physical characteristics are often used to identify ‘race,’ meaning that individuals are often categorised differently to the ways in which they categorise themselves. Many are viewed as ‘black’ (Chiong 1998; Song 2007; Tizard and Phoenix 2002; Ifekwunigwe 1999), which renders their mixed identities invisible. This means that teachers are unaware of any needs or challenges children experience in relation to their mixed identities. Focusing on the variable ways in which mixed heritage individuals feel about how they are seen by the wider public, Song and Aspinall (2012) describe the emotional and psychological toll experienced by some, especially those viewed as ‘black’, who not only have their mixed identities misrecognised, but also experience the negative imagery and meanings attributed to being ‘black’ by the wider public. Tikly et al. (2004) note this whilst researching barriers to educational achievement experienced by mixed white/ black Caribbean students, suggesting that this group shared the low teacher expectations and negative stereotyping experienced by many black Caribbean students at school. Mixed heritage children’s absence from school policy, achievement monitoring and the school curriculum acted as a further barrier as it made any educational underachievement difficult to be challenged (Tikly et al. 2004).

Inaccurate perceptions about their home backgrounds can also cause frustration amongst this group (Wilson 1987; Tikly et al. 2004). Tikly et al.’s (2004) research suggests that teachers assumed mixed white/ black Caribbean children in their schools to be residing solely with white mothers who found it difficult to raise racial self-esteem amongst children, and that boys lacked positive role models when fathers were ‘off site’. Teachers believed that living with a lone parent led to ‘identity issues’ or that children might suffer from a ‘culture clash’ (Edwards et al. 2008). However, Twine (2010) suggests lone parents often build extensive networks that nurture their children’s identities and support themselves and their children with a myriad of issues. Furthermore, Phoenix and Husain (2007) suggest that the notion that fathers are absent from their children’s lives if they are non resident is no longer assumed as readily as it was in the past, and that there are various ways in which fathers might still contribute to their children’s lives.

Describing how mixed heritage individuals experience discrimination differently to people with two black or two white parents, both Phoenix and Tizard (2002) and Dewan (2008) suggest they suffer similar kinds of insults levelled at black children as well as more specific names related to their own skin tone and appearance such as, ‘yellow belly’ and ‘half breed.’ Racist name-calling is used by some children to exclude mixed heritage peers from black or white friendship groups, in order that they might assert their difference and gain social status and power over them (Phoenix and Tizard 2002; Ali 2003). This is reflected in Quilliam and Redd’s (2009) study which suggests that although there is not strong evidence supporting the idea that mixed heritage children are rejected to the point of becoming socially isolated, they may face occasional social rejection from members of single race groups. The effects of this may also be exacerbated for individuals who suffer discrimination within their own families (Barn and Harman 2006; Dewan 2008). Whilst some are ridiculed for looking different from other family members, others are kept in ignorance about their family heritage. There may well then be limited opportunities for them to explore issues of identity within their family contexts.

Existing literature (Caballero et al. 2007; Dewan 2008: Mirza 2008) also contends that teachers lack confidence when engaging with diversity issues in educational contexts, suggesting that whilst they might possess an ‘abstract awareness’ of racial and cultural difference they do not talk about ‘race’, fearing that if they use terms such as ‘mixed race’ and ‘mixed heritage’ they might be ‘putting their foot in it.’ A tendency to misrecognise mixed heritage individuals as black, to hold inaccurate assumptions about their home lives and to generally lack confidence in discussing matters relating to race, suggests that teachers are not aware of the challenges these children face and are therefore not able to support them. The following section outlines the methods taken to discover factors necessary in supporting children to manage these various challenges and discover whether their schools support them to do this.

**Methods**

Data presented in this article are drawn from a wider research project, the overall aim of which was to explore the experiences that children of mixed white/ black Caribbean and mixed white/ black African heritage had in two secondary schools in an inner London borough. At the time of the research the borough was one of the most ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse boroughs in Britain. 33% of the population as a whole was of an ethnic minority. This included the second highest population of black Caribbean residents of any UK Local Authority and the fourth highest black African population. About 10% of the ethnic minority population was from a mix of white and other ethnic minority groups; 4.4% were mixed white/ black Caribbean and 1.4% mixed white/ black African. Two secondary schools, Cheverell and Caldecote (pseudonyms), were chosen for the research project because they had the highest number of mixed heritage students on roll; 4% of the 619 students at Cheverell claimed a mixed heritage and 7% of the 1163 at Caldecote. Both schools were Local Authority mixed gender comprehensive schools where the majority of children were from minority ethnic heritage backgrounds, mainly black African, black Caribbean and Portuguese. Both schools had been commended in recent Ofsted inspections for their pastoral systems, which supported the ‘well-being’ of all children.

*Data collection 1: interviews*

Data were collected through a series of qualitative interviews with a small sample of individuals who provided detailed accounts of their experiences. Although the use of questionnaires might have generated data from a wider sample, face to face discussions proved important as many participants stated that they rarely reflected on or discussed their experiences and therefore needed time to ‘think aloud.’ Discussions were also sensitive as participants discussed racism and family rejection. In total 39 interviews were conducted with teachers, parents and children who attended the two schools.

At the beginning of the project nine in depth exploratory interviews were conducted with an opportunity sample (Woods 2006) of parents and guardians. Each was asked to talk about their child’s experiences, and in some cases their own experiences of growing up as mixed heritage individuals. During these discussions a list of common experiences emerged which were used to design a schedule for the subsequent 26 semi-structured interviews with head teachers, teachers, learning mentors and teaching assistants, and four focus group interviews with fourteen mixed heritage children from Years 9 and 10. Questions focused on eliciting detailed discussions in relation to children’s identities; heritage; friendship groups; gender and the school curriculum. At the request of the two headteachers, detailed handwritten notes were taken during interviews with children, whilst those with adults were digitally recorded.

In both schools the head teacher provided a schedule of ‘useful people to see,’ often staff members who had expressed an ‘interest in the subject’ or were, in fact, of mixed heritage themselves. This meant that not only did they offer a perspective on the experiences of mixed heritage children in the school, but also compared it to their own or in some cases their children’s experiences. Form tutors approached children for focus group interviews. If they were willing, further permission was sought from those who acted in guardianship. Anonymity, confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time were stressed. Guardians were also told that children would be interviewed in friendship groups, for no more than an hour in a familiar environment within the school. The children selected for interview were described as those who would be ‘willing to talk.’ It is important to note however, that their views might have been unrepresentative of those considered ‘unwilling’ and that these children too might have had interesting experiences to share. Furthermore, whilst being acquainted with each other might have helped children feel more relaxed in a focus group, their friendships might have involved ingrained interactional patterns that led to overlooking or hiding personal information which might have proved useful to the aims of the research (Wirsing 2008). It is not possible to generalise conclusions across this group as a whole, either in the two schools, in London, or indeed nationally. Mixed heritage children who live and attend schools in mainly white areas, for example, might well experience schooling quite differently from their contemporaries in more diverse schools. The purpose remained purely to gather detailed comments about children’s experiences at school, and in doing so, to ‘give them a voice’ (Conteh et al. 1995: ix).

*Initial Data analysis*

Data were coded manually throughout the research process. Recorded interviews were transcribed fully and hand written notes typed in detail. As the interviews progressed, a ‘repeated reading’ of the transcripts and field notes ensured familiarisation with the breadth and depth of the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). Careful analysis and annotation of interview notes began to reveal common patterns and shared experiences in the data suggesting that saturation (Bunce et al. 2006) had been reached. Handwritten lists of common patterns and experiences thus became initial codes. As the interviews progressed, the entire data set was worked through, giving full and equal attention to each data item (Braun and Clarke 2006). Subsequently all data were initially coded, sorted and added to the list of different codes that had been identified and copied into separate computer word files. By following this process ten key themes were identified detailing the experiences that mixed heritage children had at school. The ten themes including, ‘Teachers’ perceptions about children’s home lives’ and ‘Mixed heritage and gender,’ were named in order to clarify what each theme was about, to identify the story that each theme told and consider how each theme fitted into the overall broader story.

*Further Data analysis using Ungar et al. (2007)*

Data gathered during the wider research project revealed that many mixed heritage children suffered discrimination at school. Whilst some were developing the ‘character and resilience’ required to cope, others were not. In order to understand why this was the case and how teachers might support them, a further analysis of data was conducted using Ungar et al.’s (2007) framework. In order to do this, the experiences of six children from the overall data set, were isolated into six separate case studies. The details of the sample and the rationale for their selection is outlined below. It was hoped that applying Ungar et al.’s (2007) framework to the six case studies, would support a deeper understanding of how and why the six children developed, or did not develop, the resilience necessary to deal with the challenges they faced. Two questions guided this further analysis:

* What factors support mixed heritage children to cope with adversity?
* What role do schools play in supporting children of mixed heritage cope with adversity?

Ungar et al. (2007) developed their framework in response to their findings from a 14-site, 11-country study amongst young people aged between 12- 23 years. Findings showed that if young people had access to seven different factors, such as supportive relationships and material resources, they would be more likely to develop the resilience to cope with challenging life circumstances. These seven factors have been outlined below in Table 1. Although all seven factors were important to individuals, the ways in which they contributed to their resilience differed, depending on their different life circumstances. Ungar et al.’s (2007) framework also demonstrates the many different ways in which individuals from similar contexts coped with adversity. They claim that many international studies assume homogeneity within a country population and therefore ‘overlook’ the different ways young people, who live in geographic proximity to one another, find to cope. They claim that case-by-case comparisons of quite similar young people in their research demonstrated unique aspects of how adversity is overcome. This could prove important if such a framework is to be useful for teachers in the UK. It might highlight that even though mixed heritage children attend the same schools and live in the same communities, assumptions cannot be made about the level of support and guidance they receive at home.

In order to answer the two research questions above, a careful analysis of data using the seven factors in the framework was needed.

**Table 1. The seven factors**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Tension** | **Components** |
| **Access to material resources** | Financial resources- providing opportunities for young people to widen horizons, establish interests and nurture identities. Involvement of parents in young people’s schooling. |
| **Access to supportive relationships** | Relationships with significant others, peers, adults in one’s family and community which nurture identity, self -esteem and provide guidance. |
| **Development of a desirable personal identity** | Beliefs, values, a pride in cultural heritage. Self-esteem. Feeling acknowledged at school and in the community. |
| **Experiences of power and control** | Caring for oneself- knowing where and how to access support when needed. |
| **Adherence to cultural traditions** | Adherence to, or knowledge of, one’s local/ familial cultural practices, values and beliefs. |
| **Experience of social justice** | Finding a meaningful role in one’s community/ school that brings with it acceptance and social equality. Having your voice heard and having the opportunity to discuss issues of identity and discrimination |
| **Experience of a sense of cohesion with others** | Feeling a part of something larger than one’s self socially and spiritually- school, community. Participating in school life. |

*Data collection 2: The case study sample*

Six cases were chosen from the wider research project. In each case participants’ names have been changed to ensure anonymity. Lisa and Reuben were part of the opportunity sample (Woods 2006) and the four others were selected by their form tutors to take part in focus group discussion. Although the ways in which they selected might have brought limitations to the data, the six cases provided the most interesting insights into ways in which children were, or were not, able to access the seven factors necessary for coping with adversity. The sample was representative of the gender, socio economic background and ethnicity of all research participants and was diverse enough to show variation in the ways in which children coped. As can be seen from the table below, the four females, and two males all claimed either a mixed white/ black Caribbean or white/ black African heritage. Although from different social backgrounds all six lived in the inner London Borough. In each case, the extent to which teachers supported them to cope with adversity was explored.

In order that this article sufficiently demonstrate the usefulness of the framework for generating detailed information about children’s experiences at home and school, three cases were chosen from the original six. It was hoped that three cases, explored in depth, would give teachers an understanding of how to assess children’s needs and plan for their support at school. The three cases were selected purposively because they represented the extremes of what happens when a child is not able to access the seven factors necessary to developing resilience, and what happens when they are. Reuben was part of the opportunity sample (Woods 2006) used in exploratory discussion and Esme and Kim had been selected by their form tutors to take part in focus group discussion. Kim had no guidance from adults at home or school about how to manage discrimination. The consequences for her were the most extreme because she was regularly excluded from school because of her frustration and inability to cope with the discrimination she faced. Conversely Esme had the support and guidance of both immediate and extended ‘family’, including aunts and family friends, and therefore developed strategies to deal with discrimination. To represent the experiences of boys, Reuben’s case was considered more useful than Joe’s as it gave an overview of his entire school experience, whereas Joe’s focused on his time in Year 7, 8 and 9. It also provided the most extreme example of teachers’ perceptions of, and expectations about ‘black’ children’s attitudes to learning, and how mixed heritage children are similarly vulnerable. It is hoped that the findings from extreme cases will, in this case, be relevant in explaining the more typical cases and highlight to teachers the importance of their role in the supporting all children. The words of the participants are quoted at length to enable the reader to develop as detailed an understanding as possible of children’s perspectives on their experiences.

**Table 2. The case study sample**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Name of case** | **Self- Categorisation** | **Gender/ Age** | **Sources of data** | **Social Class**  **(How determined)** |
| Lisa | Mixed white mother/ Barbadian father | Female | In depth exploratory interview | Described her mother  as white working class and father as working class Barbadian |
| Esme | Mixed white American mother/ black Ethiopian father | 11 year old female | Focus group discussion | Mother described her as coming from a ‘professional home’ |
| Reuben | Mixed white father/ black Kenyan mother | 22 year old male | In depth exploratory interview | N/A |
| Kim | Mixed white mother/ black Jamaican father | 15 year old female | Focus group/ individual interview. Semi structured interview with educational professional | Described by teacher as ‘living with a white working class mother’ |
| Joe | Mixed white mother/ black Jamaican father | 14 year old male | In depth exploratory interview with mother | Mother described him as coming from a ‘professional home’ |
| Nina | Mixed white mother/ black Jamaican father | 11 year old female | In depth exploratory interview with mother | Mother described her as coming from a ‘professional home’ |

**Research findings**

All six individuals faced adversity at school including name-calling, inaccurate perceptions about their home lives and attitudes to learning. Whilst data analysed by the framework demonstrated how all seven factors interacted to support children to cope, supportive relationships, primarily amongst family networks, appeared a prerequisite to their capacity to access other factors. These relationships provided love, trust and belonging, which challenged marginalisation, nurtured self-image and provided them with emotional and practical support. Schools did not provide children with the necessary support to overcome adversity, because teachers lacked awareness and understanding of mixed identities in ways that have been identified in the literature. This proved especially detrimental to children who lacked the support and guidance of familial networks. The following section presents a detailed analysis of the experiences of three participants.

*What factors support mixed heritage children to cope with adversity?*

Research suggests that the family is the immediate care-giving environment for children (Brooks 2006). Esme possessed various familial relationships that shaped her personal identity, her cultural belonging and connections with others. She lived with her black Ethiopian father, white American mother and three siblings and had developed a close relationship with her extended family, particularly her Ethiopian Auntie, whom she saw every day after school. Esme’s mother described her as, ‘*being raised by two mums’* and suggested her attachment to Auntie had given her, ‘*an Ethiopian identity’* and strong affinity with the traditions of Ethiopian culture:

*She craves the food; she eats what her uncle eats*. *Auntie has no children of her own and it has already been decided that Esme will look after her when she’s old- a big thing in Ethiopian culture. They’ve already divided up the jewellery. She wanted to get her ears pierced- I said in two years but Auntie let her do it, it would have been a lot earlier in Ethiopian culture.*

Esme’s closeness to her Aunt was exacerbated by the fact that her Aunt felt rejected by Esme’s younger sister, who looked like and identified with her mother. Auntie reinforced this by referring to her as, ‘*mummy’s girl*’. Esme described how she had been frustrated with her hair when she was younger as it was, ‘*too puffy’*, a fact made worse by her little sister’s straight hair which was, ‘*like mum’s*’. Her Aunt’s support with managing her hair had been important because it had given her pride in her appearance and a feeling of acknowledgement both in school and in the community. She had an, *‘Ethiopian hairstyle’* which she enjoyed showing to family cousins whilst on holiday in Boston.

Despite her close relationship with her Aunt, Esme had been very demanding of her mother’s attention when her little sister was born. Her mother was sensitive to this and they had, ‘*special days’* together. This gave Esme a sense of control over how she accessed her two closest relationships to develop her own personal identity, a choice of, *‘what parts of her identity she takes from what relation’.* Her mother described how:

*Auntie doesn’t like to go to the cinema/ theatre so I do that with her.* *Esme wants jeans like me, boots like me and also to be like her cousin on my side. That’s the part of her identity that wants to be like me. She doesn’t want to dress like Auntie who’s a bit middle-aged in this respect. I suppose she is drawing what she wants from different mums.*

Esme described how her relationships had provided her with the support to manage any discrimination relating to her mixed identity. She reported that she had been very upset and confused when her black girlfriends rejected her friendship at school. Her mother had explained that it might have stemmed from Esme’s, ‘*ability to attract attention from a black boy and two mixed heritage boys that were in her class’* and explained how, ‘*jealousy might present in a negative way*.’ She had given Esme various strategies to deal with it.

Esme utilised all seven factors presented in the framework. Her range of supportive relationships nurtured her personal identity and provided her with an understanding of discrimination and the tools to combat it. Relationships ensured adherence to cultural traditions; these provided her with shared beliefs and values with her family and a sense of cohesion with others. She also demonstrated an ability to care for herself by using the support of different relationships for her different needs.

Kim faced a number of challenges both at home and at school, but lacked various factors outlined in the framework. She lived with her white ‘working class’ mother and her brother. Their father, who was of black Jamaican heritage, did not live with the family and was reported, by a teacher, to be in prison. Teachers suggested that her family’s lack of material resources was in some part responsible for domestic violence within the home and that this was ‘acted out’ through her mother’s aggression towards Kim’s teachers, and Kim’s physical reaction to the discrimination she faced at school. One suggested:

*Poverty is behind a lot of it; dad is in prison. Kim over sticks up for herself.* *When this (name calling) happens she lashes out, asking questions later. She is constantly being sent home. All* *these issues from home* *have an impact on her happiness and progress at school.*

Kim spoke about the names that she and her friends were called at school. They included:

*Yellow,* *mongrels; rich tea biscuit; muffins;* *yellow - we have to put up with cussing.* *They call us grey too- black and white makes grey- we’re elephants. They know where black people come from. And white people, they’re just ‘neeks’* (someone who works hard at school)*, but they always want to know where mixed race come from.*

She suggested that although, *‘we find the cussing funny amongst ourselves’,* it made her angry*.* Kim lacked a close relationship to support her manage challenging circumstances. She did not, ‘*talk to her mum,’* about name-calling. Neither did her teachers acknowledge it, dismissing it as, ‘*just part of the vernacular*.’ She therefore ‘lashed out’ as a way of dealing with her frustration. Furthermore, one teacher suggested that Kim, and her friends, lacked cultural experiences, a view which conflicted with Kim’s own experiences:

*They have never said they’ve been to Jamaica. They’re all Caribbean. They don’t really have a sense of being mixed. Kim has* c*onstant issues around friendships and bonding with others in school. She has issues around her ethnicity. She is confused; she makes racist comments against other mixed race girls.*

Yet Kim described how:

*I have both cultures, sometimes my mum cooks Jamaican food and we listen to Jamaican music. My granddad lives in Jamaica but he comes to see us even though we‘re with my mum.*

She also described how some of the teachers, ‘*think I’m black.’* She found this very frustrating, as she did the fact that people spoke of President Obama as black, ‘*it bothers me that mixed race is classed as black.’* This suggested that she did have a sense of being mixed heritage, despite the perceptions of her teachers. Nonetheless she was keen to assert that it was, ‘*good to have a chance to talk about our identity and stuff like this; this is the first time that anybody’s ever asked me about it. We never talk about it at school.*’

Kim was keen to talk about issues relating to her mixed heritage and was keen to assert that students lacked the chance to talk about being mixed heritage at school. She suggested that, *‘Portuguese and Somalis get everything- group meetings; this school pays more attention to them.* *We don’t get treated equally.* Although her friends in the focus group felt that it would be good to talk about their history as mixed heritage people, Kim focused on the need to have, ‘*an assembly about the cussing that we have to put up with,’* the need to book a room where:

*We could go and talk about stuff like this- how’s your month been? Anybody*

*called you a cuss word this month? White people have the library- black people have the canteen- we don’t have anywhere.* *The Somalis have their own corridor- they learn their language even though they know it anyway.*

Kim lacked supportive relationships to nurture her mixed identity and empower her with strategies to deal with discrimination. She developed a sense of cohesion with other mixed heritage girls who were able to empathise with each other’s frustrations, but she was not able to vent her frustrations other than with an aggression which was responsible for so many of her exclusions from school. Whilst Ungar et al. (2007) highlight that feeling a part of something larger than one’s self socially and spiritually is essential to coping with adversity, Kim lacked any experiences of social justice, feeling both marginalised and misunderstood. This led her to resent others in the school community. One teacher suggested that more should be done to support this group of children at school, as many of their parents did not talk to them about their identities at home. Yet, at the time of the research, their identities and the challenges that they faced were not acknowledged at school.

Reuben’s personal circumstances changed at the age of 12 when he moved to London with his black Kenyan mother, white English father and his sister. His father died soon after they arrived. He described how he had two experiences of being mixed heritage: at school in Kenya, and in London. In Kenya his parents never talked to him about being mixed heritage because, ‘*I was happy, I never thought about it’.* Yet, when the family moved to London his mother became anxious because they were the only ‘*black’* family in the area, and she assumed that they would be, ‘*blamed for any trouble*’. He explained how the, ‘*neighbours were really unfriendly- I was used to Africa where everyone was friendly’.*

When he first arrived in London, Reuben, ‘*got picked on a bit,’* but thought that this was because, *‘he was short- or because he was from Africa,’* not because he was of mixed heritage. To begin with he progressed well at school, getting ‘A’ grades in his first two years. Although his mother expected him to do well at school:

*It was my dad who had sat down and done my homework with me. When he died, mum had to put food on the table but expected me to get on with my schoolwork. I lost motivation and didn’t work as hard as I could have.’*

Reuben recalled how the science teacher would discriminate against the black children in the school:

*The class was split- black and white- the white kids were at the front and the*

*black at the back- she would say to come and sit at the front because you*

*want to learn, they don’t want to learn back there. There were racist comments flying around. I was caught in the middle. I didn’t know where to sit- if I sat at the front I was a ‘neek’.* *I was in the top tier for science but then got moved down because of my behaviour*.

The division between the black and white children in the school demanded that he, ‘*choose between the two groups’*. He recognised that whilst in Years 7 and 8 everybody was friendly with each other, in Years 10 and 11 boys started dividing into groups along ‘*racial lines’*. The emotional gap left by the loss of his father forced Reuben to seek comfort, trust and belonging from a peer group but he was confused about which group to join. He believed that girls have their mothers throughout their upbringings, ‘*they can talk and stuff whereas many boys, without a role model, have to figure it all out on their own- they have no one.’* He described how he was lost and that as a boy of mixed heritage he had two choices:

*To go with the white group… be a skin head- a yob or they can be*

*with the black boys, be a ‘rude boy’- become all trendy/ cool. I had a main*

*group but I hung with the white group for a while and got into a lot of trouble*

*and then with a black group where it was, us against the world. I stopped telling my mum stuff; I don’t tell her stuff now.*

He suggested that, ‘g*enerally my mixed race friends are all troubled- society is out to get them.’* Like Kim, Reuben described how he was usually, ‘*seen as black’* despite the fact that *‘my mum brought me up as mixed race.’* Reuben admitted that he had not progressed in the way he would have wished at school due to the number of challenges that he faced. A lack of material resources within his family led to his mother’s preoccupation with providing the necessary resources for her family. Without her support for his schoolwork he lost the motivation to succeed. The death of his father, his role model, forced Reuben to look to his male peer group for emotional support, which would develop his identity and provide guidance on ‘*how to be a mixed race man’*. As with Kim’s experience, this provided a sense of cohesion but it was based on a shared anger mainly against the police and his school.

He did not discuss his experiences with his mother nor seek her support. This was in contrast to his time in Kenya where he had supportive relationships and his mixed heritage, *‘was not an issue’.* However, Reuben suggested that as he became older he obtained emotional support and guidance from a variety of relationships; a range of mentors, his girlfriend and close male friendships, which meant that, *‘I don’t think about all of this very much now’.*

**Discussion**

Henderson (2012) argues that the various factors which enable children to develop character and resilience are readily available in schools. Yet data presented here reveals that not only did the two schools fail to support mixed heritage children develop character and resilience, but that they actually contributed to the challenges that they faced (Brooks 2006). This is because teachers made inaccurate assumptions about children’s home lives, identities and attitudes to learning and failed to tackle the similar types of discriminatory behaviour that have been highlighted in previous research (Ali 2003; Tizard and Phoenix 2002).

If schools have a key role to play in building character and resilience amongst all of their pupils, it is imperative that teachers understand the needs of mixed heritage children. This will help them build the positive relationships that Chung-Do et al. (2015) suggest have been consistently shown to be a factor in developing children’s capacities to cope with adversity. Ungar et al.’s (2007) framework could support teachers to do this. The detailed analysis which the framework demands provides sufficient information about children’s experiences at home and school, to give teachers an understanding of their needs. The seven factors used to analyse data about children’s experiences also act as a useful checklist with which to explore which factors individual children may or may not have access to, and then plan appropriate ways in which individuals can be supported.

If teachers gain a detailed understanding of children’s experiences at home and school, they may be less likely to make the types of assumptions that threatened children’s capacities to cope with adversity. The mixed group is not homogenous. Their experiences are varied and shaped by their gender, geographical location, religion, interests and hobbies (Song 2007; Ali 2003). Yet Kim’s teacher’s assumption that she was confused and frustrated because she lacked ‘Jamaican culture’ in her life, is typical of the legacy of conceptions about people from mixed racial backgrounds as confused and liable to identity crisis (Edwards et al. 2008). Ungar et al. (2007) have suggested that what might appear like disadvantage from the outside, might not necessarily be so on the inside and although her father did not live in the family home, like Esme, Kim suggests that she benefitted from ‘both cultures’ because of her grandfather’s visits from Jamaica. Therefore, teachers need to recognise that the term ‘family’ encompasses a variety of members including grandparents, aunts, foster-carers and friends, all of whom have a role to play in the care and well-being of children (Tran 2014). When considering how children’s experiences may be shaped by gender, it is useful to note Rutter’s (1987) view that there are sex related differences in risk and resilience. He suggests, for example, that boys are at a greater risk of developing emotional problems when they are exposed to stressful family arrangements. Although data here are limited, Reuben’s experience provides a valuable example of how his capacity to develop character and resilience was undermined by a range of variables including the death of his father and the family’s move to London.

Secondly, a more detailed understanding about mixed heritage children’s family backgrounds might overcome the tendency to categorise many as ‘black’ (Chiong 1998; Song 2007; Tizard and Phoenix 2002; Ifekwunigwe 1999). Both Kim and Reuben were identified as ‘black’ at school and were thus attributed some negative social values of being black in the education system. Whilst not the subject of this article, the experiences of ‘black’ children in the education system have been well documented in scholarly research (Demie, 2005; Gillborn et al., 2012; Strand 2012). Reuben described how his decision to join a black friendship group had a negative impact on his progress at school because assumptions were made about his, and his black friends’ attitudes towards learning. His experiences also demonstrate how mixed heritage children identify themselves differently, in different situations, depending on what aspects of their identities are most salient (Root 1996). Reuben moved between different friendship groups at different ages because he didn’t always find it easy to ‘define himself.’ His need to adopt a black friendship group in Year 10, was based on a need to affirm a ‘black’ identity. If his teachers had understood, they might have been able to supply the appropriate support and guidance at the appropriate times to meet his needs.

The All Party Parliamentary group’s ‘Character and Resilience’ manifesto suggests that schools should target those most in need through poverty and disadvantage. Data presented in this article suggest a need for schools to recognise that disadvantage takes a variety of forms. The main disadvantage for all three children stemmed not from poverty, but the ways in which teachers and peers made assumptions about their racial identities. Although his mother ‘expected him to get on with his schoolwork’ and maintain the good grades he had attained in Years 7 and 8, Reuben lost motivation to do well because his teachers perceived that him and his ‘black’ friends were disinterested in learning. He claims that without these challenges he might have progressed much better at school. Schools might therefore need a more nuanced conceptualisation of disadvantage and approach to targeting support.

Chung-Do et al. (2015) suggest that how involved children are with their school and how positively they feel about school is a necessary factor in developing their capacity to cope with adversity. If children are not supported and feel misunderstood, they can become marginalised. Kim was frustrated by teachers’ inaccurate assumptions about her home life and her belief that mixed heritage children did not get treated equally at her school because the Portuguese and Somali children ‘got everything’. She suggested that mixed heritage children should receive the support of monthly meetings and whole school assemblies to raise awareness about their experiences at school. Phillips et al. (2008) have highlighted the work of an innovative Multiple Heritage Service in Sheffield which provides school-based group sessions on cultural heritage and the positive impacts on children’s well-being and identity. Whilst this might prove an excellent resource for mixed heritage children, it again demands a detailed understanding of their needs and the challenges they face, at different times in their school careers, to ensure resources tailored at building self-esteem and perseverance are targeted appropriately, rather than based on misguided assumptions and generalisations about young people’s backgrounds and identities.

**Conclusion**

The All Party Parliamentary group’s ‘Character and Resilience’ manifesto suggests that all too often the soft skills associated with character and resilience are neglected or at best given second billing in schools. Knowing their pupils must achieve specified grades places pressure on teachers to be more preoccupied with children’s grades than their individual contexts (Goodman and Burton 2012), and whether or not these contexts provide the factors necessary for developing character and resilience. Although the manifesto states that children’s resilience should be nurtured through leadership and debating classes and extra curricular team sports and music, data presented in this article, although limited in scope, suggest that a connectedness to people and their environment (Benard 1991) is paramount and certainly a prerequisite if children are to benefit from any activities which nurture resilience. There is then a pressing need for teachers to build positive relationships with mixed heritage children, based on an understanding of their individual needs and the challenges they face.

It is hoped that a framework such as Ungar et al.’s (2007) could provide teachers with a practical resource, that generates sufficient detail about children’s individual contexts to help them better understand children as individuals, whilst also providing the support and guidance to nurture their self-esteem, perseverance and ability to bounce back from setbacks.

**Words: 7,173**

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