Constructing multiculturalism at school: Negotiating tensions in talk about ethnic diversity

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Abstract
Recent trends in British education policy have led to an increased focus on promoting ethnic diversity in schools, as well as greater parental involvement in school choice. This combination has led some schools to actively market diversity as a selling point in order to attract more minority ethnic students, as well as attract White middle-class students seeking a more 'diverse' educational experience. This article analyses how students attending such a school in England engage with discourses of multiculturalism. I identify three themes that characterise talk about multiculturalism at school: (1) multiculturalism-as-beneficial commodity, (2) claims of 'reverse racism' in provision for minority groups, and (3) denial of racism and constructing the school as a tolerant environment where everybody gets along. Through an analysis of discourse strategies and positioning tactics, I demonstrate how students negotiate tensions between the existence of racism and the construction of an inclusive and anti-racist educational environment.

Keywords
British education, denial of racism, discourse, diversity, education, ethnicity, multiculturalism, racism, reverse racism, schools

Introduction

Over the past 30 years, education policy in the United Kingdom has placed an increased focus on promoting 'multiculturalism' in the state-funded compulsory schooling system. During the 1970s and early 1980s, education policy targeted perceived under-achievement among African Caribbean and minority ethnic youth, such as additional

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schooling and addressing structural racism in the education system (Department of Education and Science, 1981; Modood and May, 2001; Reay and Mirza, 1997). Subsequent policies moved away from a 'deficit' model of minority ethnic children towards an inclusive vision of 'education for all' (Department of Education and Science, 1985). This shift towards inclusive multiculturalism has characterised education policy since the mid-1980s, and schools in England now have a legal duty to promote diversity and 'cohesion' (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007: 3). While increased focus has been placed on multiculturalism in British education, schools have also been positioned as potentially 'problematic' sites for religious extremism in more recent years. This has accelerated the introduction of citizenship classes that aim to teach so-called 'British values', such as tolerance, respect and diversity (Osler, 2009, 2011; Rhamie et al., 2012).

The growing emphasis on multicultural curricula and schooling experiences has coincided with parallel policy changes that have sought to increase parental choice in the state-funded schooling system, such that parents are able to exercise varying degrees of choice over which school their child attends. This means that students rarely attend their geographically most proximal school. Rather than leading to greater social diversity, however, school choice policies have instead increased segregation, with simulation studies showing that allocating children to their nearest school leads to lesser socioeconomic segregation than when parents are allowed to choose schools (Allen, 2007). The relevance of parental choice policies to multicultural education is that there now exists a 'quasi-market' (Glennerster, 1991) in which schools seek to differentiate themselves in order to attract (certain kinds of) students. For example, some schools now actively promote ethnic diversity as a way of marketing themselves, seeking to appeal to parents of minority ethnic students who may want additional provision for their children (Weekes-Bernard, 2007) and/or target White middle-class parents who want their children to have a more 'diverse' educational experience. Reay et al. (2007) find that the latter group is motivated by a commitment to, in one interviewee's words, producing 'a different kind of middle class children'. However, while these parents might see multiculturalism as a good thing in itself, it is also viewed as a useful resource that can be used to gain advantage in better preparing their children for the 'realities' of 21st century life (Hollingworth and Williams, 2010: 51; Reay et al., 2007: 1046). One notable aspect of this and much other discourse on 'diversity' in education is that parents are much more likely to focus on the benefits of ethnic diversity than class diversity.

These developments in British multicultural education have led to growing interest in how people articulate discourses about multicultural education contexts (e.g. Hollingworth and Mansaray, 2012; Hollingworth and Williams, 2010; Keddie, 2014). Talking about race, ethnicity and multiculturalism is a mechanism through which people negotiate social relations and identities in everyday life, as well as reproduce ideologies and power relations (Bucholtz, 2011a; Reisigl and Wodak, 2001). This article analyses how discourses of multiculturalism are reproduced, reinterpreted and used for identity work by students in a secondary school in England. The school – here referred to by the pseudonym *Ashton Valley School* – maintains an explicit focus on multiculturalism as one of its selling points and also features a substantial number of White middle-class children whose parents seek a more 'diverse' educational experience for their child.

This makes it an interesting case study for examining how discourses of multiculturalism play out in the context of planned multicultural educational environments. The ethnographic fieldwork and discourse analysis presented in the following identifies three major themes that characterise talk about multiculturalism in the school: (1) multiculturalism as a commodity or beneficial resource, (2) claims of 'reverse racism' in the school's multicultural education policies, and (3) denial of racism and constructing the school as anti-racist and tolerant. I interrogate how students use discourse strategies in order to do identity work in talk about ethnic diversity and show that this acts as a form of social practice, allowing students to negotiate tensions between the existence of racism and the construction of an anti-racist educational environment.

Talking about multiculturalism at Ashton Valley School

The data in this study are drawn from a larger project examining adolescents' language use in multiethnic communities, which took a broadly 'sociocultural linguistics' approach to the study of language and identity (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004, 2005, 2008), incorporating ethnography, interactional sociolinguistics, variationist sociolinguistics, and phonetics (see Kirkham, 2013, 2015, in press; Kirkham and Mackey, 2016, for details on other aspects of the project). The study was grounded in an ethnography of Ashton Valley School, a secondary school located in Sheffield, a city in the north of England. The school was located in an affluent neighbourhood, but actively sought to increase (mainly ethnic) diversity in the school, which was achieved via policies designed to provide additional support for minority ethnic children, such as minority students' achievement programmes (e.g. Weekes-Bernard, 2007: 32). The school also maintained an overt focus on ethnic diversity in its promotional literature, explaining how such diversity makes the school more representative of society and allows its students to become 'tolerant' and 'understanding' of 'other cultures'. Similar presentations of diversity have long been used to promote a range of commodities and services (Rothenberg, 2000) and, in doing so, Ashton Valley School adopts what Hollingworth and Mansaray (2012) call a 'social mix ideology', whereby diversity is offered as a potential selling point to parents. Indeed, many of the large numbers of White middle-class children who attended this school could have attended another nearby school, but their parents sent them to Ashton Valley instead in order to provide them with a more 'diverse' experience that they felt would offer other advantages in life.

My fieldwork involved attending the school alongside students aged 13–15 years for between two and four days per week for just over one school year. This was done with the aim of better understanding how adolescents use language as a form of social practice and to chart the local meanings of language, identity and ethnicity in the school (e.g. Bucholtz, 1999, 2011b; Eckert, 2000; Kirkham and Moore, 2013; Mendoza-Denton, 2008; Rampton, 2006). As Bucholtz (2011a) points out in her study of narratives of racial conflict, 'research on race talk that is not informed by ethnography risks collecting superficial or decontextualized accounts of race as well as treating racial processes in a monolithic and overdetermined fashion' (p. 386). Audio recordings of conversations with groups of between one and four students were made around a year after I began my fieldwork. These conversations were, in part, an extension of my regular interactions

with the students, with the recordings being carried out with self-selected communities of practice, although some students were occasionally recorded one-on-one. Recordings were collected from 68 students in total and took the form of largely unstructured interviews that gave the students an opportunity to talk about the things that were most meaningful to them. I only recorded interviews with students because the ethnographic dimension of the study focused particularly on the students' social practices and sought to understand them on their own terms. In order to gain the students' trust, I avoided affiliating myself with teachers in any way and, therefore, made an active decision not to interview teachers (see Eckert, 2000 and Moore, 2003 for a similar approach; for research on teachers' discourses about ethnicity and race in Britain, see Archer et al., 2010 and Keddie, 2014).

Each interview was coded for any stretches of discourse that involved talk about multiculturalism, ethnic diversity, racism or social mixing within the school. Like Bucholtz (2011b: 167–168), I do not seek to label particular individuals or episodes of talk as racist, but instead examine how talk about ethnic diversity draws upon existing – and often problematic – discourses about race, ethnicity and multiculturalism.

The data are analysed in terms of Bucholtz and Hall's (2004, 2005) framework for analysing identity in discourse. They propose that identity is the intersubjective product of deploying linguistic and semiotic practices in interaction, rather than an internal psychological state of being that exists prior to discourse. Such social practices exist in a dialectical relationship with a number of contexts beyond the immediate discourse context (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997: 258), meaning that identities not only comprise in-the-moment stances but also encompass local ethnographic positions and macro-level social categories. The mediation between linguistic behaviour in discourse and more abstract identity categories is achieved via indexicality, which relies upon ideologies that naturalise links between form and meaning, such as cultural beliefs about who does what with language (Ochs, 1992; Silverstein, 2003). Importantly, these identities are fundamentally relational in nature, in the sense that they are 'intersubjectively constructed through several, often overlapping, complementary relations, including similarity/difference, genuineness/artifice, and authority/delegitimacy' (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005: 598). Bucholtz and Hall (2004: 493) group such relations under the term *tactics of intersubjectivity*.

To illustrate this further, consider the identity relation that figures most prominently in the analysis that follows: adequation/distinction (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005: 599). *Adequation* refers to how actions that position individuals or groups as similar may involve downplaying existing differences and foregrounding similarities, whereas *distinction* may involve essentialising particular characteristics of a group in order to position them as different from something else. This may be linguistically manifested in contrast structures, such as pronominal reference (e.g. 'us' vs 'them') or via a more general discourse strategy of *erasure* (Irvine and Gal, 2000: 38). In the latter strategy, particular social characteristics are highlighted (e.g. ethnicity), but their intersections with other characteristics (e.g. social class) are erased in order to construct the invoked category as coherent and stable. In the analysis that follows, I show how the tactics of adequation/distinction are used in tandem with discourse strategies common to talk about race and ethnicity, such as denial of racism strategies (Nelson, 2013; Van Dijk,

1992). Together, these afford the construction of stances and local identities in relation to talk about ethnic diversity. Importantly, such talk acts as a form of social practice that allows students to negotiate tensions between the existence of racism and the construction of an anti-racist educational environment.

Multiculturalism as a beneficial commodity

The multiculturalism as beneficial commodity discourse represents the school's official line on ethnic diversity. This was frequently echoed in student talk about multiculturalism and ethnic diversity in the school, which often situated tolerance and understanding as resources for personal success, both now and in later life. Two brief examples of how this discourse permeated the students' talk are provided in Extract 1:[1]

Extract 1

(a)

```
1   Leila:  you just get to like learn about other like,
2           other cultures and you can make new friends.
3           and it'll just help you like,
4           later on.
5           when you get like a job or something,
6           and you're working with other people,
7           you won't be like too fussed.
```

(b)

```
1   Saliha:  if you're in a school where it's just a lot of your,
2            culture,
3            then you don't really have an understanding,
4            of other people's.
```

Leila and Saliha use pronoun indexicals to project their own claims onto a more general frame of experience: Leila claims that 'you' learn about 'other' cultures, while Saliha similarly uses generic *you*. Notably, both speakers use the term 'culture', which is frequently used as a proxy for race and ethnicity, and can often afford a way of 'cloaking racism' (Piller, 2011: 130). In this instance, 'culture' may serve to avoid explicit talk about race and ethnicity (see analysis of Extract 2 for a more detailed discussion of this strategy). However, it also enables the use of adequation and distinction identity tactics. For example, the pronoun contrasts that facilitate the opposition between 'your culture' and 'other people's' situates 'cultures' as internally coherent entities (*adequation*), which then facilitates the construction of a seemingly coherent opposition between them (*distinction*).

This tactic of distinction is further elaborated by projecting discrete differences between schools. For example, Saliha explicitly sets up a contrast structure between different kinds of schools, evident in her use of a conditional *if*-statement in constructing a

causal link between 'if you're in a school where it's just a lot of your culture' and 'then you don't really have an understanding of other people's'. Leila uses a similar linguistic formulation when she links exposure to other cultures at school to future success in adult life and employment (Extract 1a, lines 5–7). These devices construct a mutually exclusive relationship between the demographic makeup of a school and its students' tolerance of ethnic diversity. The opposition between multicultural and monocultural schools achieves adequation via the discourse strategy of *erasure* (within-population differences are downplayed), which then facilitates distinction (in the sense that it projects a coherent opposition between the two types of school). This opposition allows Leila and Saliha to position themselves as 'tolerant' and 'cosmopolitan' citizens who are aware of the perceived demands of adult life and recognise the importance of 'getting along' with diverse populations. It is notable that this discourse presentation echoes much government policy on schooling in the United Kingdom, with the belief that increasing the 'social mix' of a school is sufficient for fostering positive ethnic relations and social justice, with relatively little attention given to the role of class dynamics in these relations (Hollingworth, 2014; Reay et al., 2007).

While the classed dimensions of the multiculturalism-as-commodity discourse are not overt in Extract 1, we see greater evidence of them in Extract 2, which takes the form of a narrative by Amy, a White British girl from a highly affluent neighbourhood. Amy's parents originally wanted to send her to a private (fee-paying, non-state-funded) school, but she expressed a desire to attend Ashton Valley instead, to avoid disrupting her ethnically diverse primary school friendship network. The extract starts halfway through a conversation about whether she is glad that she attended Ashton Valley instead of a private school:

Extract 2

```
1     Amy:    well yeah because,
2             (1.0)
3             if I went to,
4             (1.0)
5             if I went somewhere else I wouldn't really get,
6             (2.0)
7             pic- like,
8             a private school.
9             I would never get like the picture of,
10            (2.0)
11            other people's,
12            (1.5)
13            backgrounds like.
14            you get more,
15            like,
16            like you get different stories and,
17            like different religions and,
18            you hear what they have to do and,
19            (1.0)
20            but if you went to a private school or whatever,
```

21	I don't think people would,
22	(2.0)
23	p-
24	most people would be from the same kinda rich,
25	background.
26	but when you come to this school there's all sorts,
27	of people.
28	and it's quite,
29	I like listening to their stories and seeing where,
30	they're from,
31	and like,
32	people with their parents and,
33	(1.0)
34	you just,
35	listen and you think how lucky you are.
36	I suppose.
37	(1.0)
38	and if I didn't come here,
39	I wouldn't realise,
40	(1.0)
41	what kind of,
42	(0.5)
43	background I'm from and how lucky I am to,
44	be who I am.
45	cause I hear stories about people,
46	people's dads running away and stuff.
47	and I sit and think I'm glad my dad doesn't,
48	(2.0)
49	doesn't do that and,
50	you just hear different people and,
51	because everyone's from a different background.
52	it's erm,
53	(1.0)

There is some evidence of the discourse strategies seen in Extract 1, such as the use of *if*-conditionals in setting up an opposition between the tolerance bred by multicultural schools and the presumed lack of tolerance in other schools. However, Amy's formulation here is far more specific, with her claim 'if I went somewhere else' being modified by 'like a private school'. By invoking private schools in opposition to multicultural ones, Amy deploys a similar tactic as Leila and Saliha, but also implies that private school was an alternative option for her, which makes relevant her own socio-economic advantage compared to many of the other students in the school. This suggests an orientation to a more explicitly classed persona that positions Amy as 'different' from other students in the school across various axes of distinction, including socioeconomic class (line 24), religion (line 17), parental nationality (lines 29–32) and a more vague notion of home life (lines 45–51). The emphasis on this kind of distinction is magnified when she uses an *if*-conditional statement in positing a causal relationship between her attendance at the school and self-awareness of her own class position ('if I

didn't come here I wouldn't realise what kind of background I'm from …'). There is also much greater use of first-person singular pronouns than in Extract 1, which makes these statements more speaker-oriented, rather than being projected onto a generic population (see lines 3–9, 21–29, 36–39, 43–45 and 47). Amy does occasionally use the generic *you* that characterised Leila and Saliha's talk in Extract 1, but Amy's *you* also has a more explicitly classed dimension, evident in the claim that 'you just listen and you think how lucky you are', which is contrasted with the stories of 'other' people. In this instance, the first-person pronouns and more restricted domain of generic *you* reflect a highly personalised orientation to a more overtly classed persona, which is emphasised by Amy's focus on contrasting her school with private schools, rather than with a more generic notion of monocultural schools. This allows Amy to construct herself as a tolerant middle-class citizen who is aware of her own privilege and sympathetic to the disadvantage of others.

Amy clearly draws upon discourses of multiculturalism as a beneficial resource, but there is also a different kind of adequation/distinction identity relation at work. As mentioned previously, Amy repeatedly makes reference to 'difference'. However, the exact dimensions of such difference are often only very weakly specified and she repeatedly uses a strategy that avoids invoking these 'other' identity categories in a more overt fashion. She primarily achieves this via the more generic term 'background'. For example, she invokes discourses of the 'absent father', claiming 'cause I hear stories about people, people's dads running away and stuff' (lines 45–47). This is a discourse that is overwhelmingly classed within the United Kingdom (De Benedictis, 2012; Scraton, 2007: 145), but Amy's use of the term 'background' around this extract (lines 43 and 51) allows her to avoid invoking overtly classed stereotypes, while still implying that 'absent fathers' are linked to particular kinds of people. Similarly, her focus on 'background' with reference to 'different stories' and 'different religions' (lines 16–17) is also highly likely to refer to ethnicity, given the strong correlation between socioeconomic status and ethnicity in the school.

This use of 'background' as a generic difference-positioning strategy acts as a mechanism that allows Amy to talk about class and ethnicity without explicitly mentioning them. We see similar strategies in the use of the word 'culture' in Extract 1, where ethnicity and race were potentially invoked with explicitly mentioning them. One function of this strategy is that it could act as a defence against potential accusations of class discrimination or racism, because it makes it easy to argue that class or race were not explicitly alluded to. But how would this fit with Amy's self-aware and sensitive middle-class persona mentioned earlier? A slightly different perspective is that this kind of evasive talk stems from what Bucholtz (2011b) calls an 'ideology of racial colorblindness' (p. 169). This entails the belief that talking about race 'sustains racism' (Gordon and Newfield, 1995: 382) and that such talk is to be avoided. Bucholtz argues that this ideology can make it difficult for White people to talk about race for fear of appearing racist, which may lead to strategies that project racial (and, I would argue, classed) difference onto more generic notions of difference. Accordingly, Amy's use of the catchall term 'background' represents one way of negotiating the conflict between acknowledging inequalities while simultaneously avoiding explicit talk about class and ethnicity. This affords the construction of a sensitive and sympathetic middle-class persona who is

aware of her privilege, but in doing so erases some of the more overt intersections between class, ethnicity and socioeconomic disadvantage.

The students of Ashton Valley School were often quick to point towards the benefits of attending a multicultural school, such as understanding and tolerance of 'other' cultures and, for some students, greater awareness of one's own privilege. This typically involves locating such benefits in the school's demographic makeup, which necessitates the construction of an opposition between multicultural and monocultural schools. While there is little doubt that greater understanding of all kinds of diversity is likely to be a positive step in promoting anti-racist action, it is important to critically reflect upon this discourse in examining exactly who benefits. Skeggs (2004: 12) has claimed that the middle classes often exploit working-class culture in order to obtain further privilege and social advantage, without necessarily doing anything to address social inequality. Reay et al. (2007) extend this argument to what I have called the multiculturalism-as-commodity discourse, claiming that when middle-class people 'make choices that are directed towards the common good, greater benefits and value still accrue to them rather than to their class and ethnic others' (Reay et al., 2007: 1055). One of the ways in which Ashton Valley School explicitly sought to extend the benefits of multicultural education to minority ethnic and disadvantaged children was through progressive schemes that aimed to support their educational skills. However, as the next section shows, these schemes were often invoked as discursive devices in fostering ethnic tensions.

Claims of 'reverse racism' in minority student provision

While Ashton Valley's ethnic diversity was positioned as beneficial for predominantly White middle-class students, the school also ran long-established support programmes for minority ethnic and heritage language-speaking students. The most notable of these was its 'Black students' achievement programme, which aimed to improve the literacy and educational attainment of Black students in the school. What I wish to focus on here is an episode in which this programme was used as mechanism for claiming the existence of so-called 'reverse racism', whereby White students claimed to be the real victims of racism (e.g. Van Dijk, 1992: 94, 1993: 260). This was a fairly common discourse in Ashton Valley and it is often reported in diverse educational contexts in which White people do not feature as an overwhelming majority (e.g. Bucholtz, 2011a: 388). Extract 3 features two White British girls, Katy and Holly, talking about ethnic diversity in the school:

Extract 3

```
1   Sam:    you do have people from a lot of different places,
2           do you think that's a good thing or,
3   Katy:   [  it is a good thing.    ]
4   Holly:  [I think it's a good thing] cause,
5           you learn how to mix with other people.
6           [and have to put up with them.]
7   Katy:   [     yeah it is but          ]
```

8		they do get a black people's,
9		(0.5)
10		group here.
11		(0.5)
12	Holly:	[yeah]
13	Katy:	[which] is unfair.
14		I think that's unfair [x xx]
15	Holly:	[black people] get treated
16		better than the white.
17	Sam:	what do you mean there's a black people's group?
18	Holly:	there's a black [people's] appreciation group.
19	Katy:	[a black]
20	Katy:	they go to Alton Towers ((an adventure theme park)) all the time,
21		they go camping,
22		they go to hostels,
23	Holly:	they go ice skating.
24	Katy:	ice skating,
25		cinema,
26		they go everywhere.
27	Holly:	[and white people don't get anything.]
28	Katy:	[and we don't get nothing.]
29	Katy:	like I'm not,
30		like being racist or anything.
31		I just think,
32		like they get a,
33		(1.0)
34		they got a lot of things and we don't.
35		but I still love like,
36		m- my closest best,
37		hhh
38		I got about four best,
39		(0.5)
40		bestest bestest friends and one of them is,
41		(1.0)
42		she's a Muslim.
43		and I just love hearing about,
44		what they can and can't do,
45		I'm not,
46		I'm not a racist person but,
47		hhh
48		but at this school you can say one thing,
49		and like people like misinterp-
50		well.
51		(1.0)
52		na- I don't think they do that.
53		I think they just chang-
54		twist words.
55		[and make people got,]
56	Holly:	[before I said,]

```
57   Katy:   like a racist name,
58           and [ I don't think that-                    ]
59   Holly:      [yeah I said to this person before,]
60           you treat black people better than you treat white people,
61           and he called me racist.
```

The extract begins with me asking a question that was prompted by Katy and Holly previously talking about a girl who was abused by other students for being racist. Questions are not simply invitations to speak, because they shape 'how and as a member of which categories the respondents should speak' (Baker, 1997: 131). Accordingly, responses to questions are not simply 'reports of experience' but 'part and parcel of a work of accounting' (Merino and Tileagă, 2011: 91) that position the speaker relative to the domain of experience under discussion. In asking this question, I explicitly invite the girls to position themselves with respect to the school's diversity, but I do so as a White male researcher talking to two White girls, which may potentially allow the girls to be more openly critical than if they had been talking to a non-White researcher.

On line 8, Katy introduces the Black students achievement programme, labelling it 'a black people's group', while Holly then calls it 'a black people's appreciation group' (lines 8–19). Katy and Holly here engage in the identity relations of adequation/distinction by setting up an opposition between the homogeneous categories of 'black people', who have a 'group', and non-Black people, who do not. The construction of this Black/non-Black opposition sets up a prolonged discussion of 'reverse racism' and accusations of racism. Van Dijk (1992: 89) notes that talk about racism frequently involves various strategies that allow speakers to deny or downplay racism; for example, simultaneous positive self-presentation *and* negative other-presentation. One way that speakers can achieve positive self-presentation is to contrast their expressed opinion with a more permanent character state (Van Dijk, 1992: 90). This may entail the use of constructions such as 'I'm not a racist person but', which Katy uses on lines 30 and 46. Notably, these constructions are used here to signal subtle topic shifts towards a related aspect of racial relations within the school, as well as to identify perceived injustices while attempting positive self-presentation. The first instance on lines 29–30 cues a mention of Katy's Muslim best friend on line 42, which is positioned in contrast to any accusations that she is racist. At the same time, Katy uses a pronoun contrast structure that has previously been identified as a feature of self/other presentation in discourse about race (Augoustinos and Every, 2007: 131), where she posits a clear distinction between 'they' and 'we', claiming that 'they got a lot of things and we don't' (line 34). A similar strategy occurs earlier, where Katy and Holly list a range of activities that the Black students attend, claiming that 'they go everywhere and white people don't get anything' (lines 14–27). In both cases, 'they' refers to 'black' people, whereas Katy and Holly situate themselves as 'white', which later simply becomes 'we', thus constructing White versus Black as an unproblematic opposition within the school.

The second instance of the 'not a racist but' construction occurs on line 46 and cues a more dramatic topic shift that engages in negative other-presentation towards those who make accusations of racism. Katy's self-interruption halfway through 'people,

like, misinterp-' (line 49) and subsequent negation of this statement on line 52 sets up a contrast between seemingly innocent 'misinterpretion' and people who 'twist words', with the latter having a more malicious and intentional aspect. This goes beyond mere 'intention-denial' (Van Dijk, 1992: 91) in the sense that Katy positions her accusers as malicious and seeking to cause trouble, thus engaging in negative other-presentation. Holly interactionally supports this position when she follows it up with a narrative in which she claimed that Black students are subjected to 'better' treatment than 'white people' (line 60), which was interpreted by another student as racist. By formulating this as a response to Katy's initial claim of how others 'twist words', Holly also brands her accuser as actively malicious, as well as intolerant of what Katy sees racism against White people. This formulation is, of course, contingent upon racism being positioned as a negative thing, which Katy explicitly acknowledges on line 57, when she talks of the dangers of getting a 'racist name'. This assists in the presentation of a balanced and reasonable persona in contrast to those who accuse them of racism, who are positioned as unreasonable and intentionally malicious (Augoustinos and Every, 2007: 131). Given Katy and Holly's attendance at a multiethnic school, there were considerable social pressures to adopt a persona that was outwardly tolerant of diversity. They manage this by constructing a persona that claims to reject perceived racism in all its forms, which *includes* additional support for minority ethnic students in the school. This is contrasted with those who see claims of perceived 'reverse racism' as an act of racism, who are constructed as intolerant and purposefully seeking to harm others by accusing them of racism.

This extract highlights a tension in how some White students attempted to talk about race, ethnicity and perceived 'reverse racism' while simultaneously claiming not to be racist. Katy and Holly prefaced their claims about alleged racism against Whites with a brief allusion to the multiculturalism as beneficial commodity discourse, which positions them as acknowledging the importance of getting on with other people and the benefits of cultural exposure. This assists in the construction of a balanced and reasonable persona, which is then used to defend them against the view that some of their statements may be considered racist. Katy and Holly's critique of special provisions for minority ethnic students is based on perceived inequities of opportunity, such as the additional social activities of the Black students achievement programme. In the 'Discussion' section, I suggest ways of integrating these issues into citizenship classes at school in order to facilitate better critical dialogue on issues of race, ethnicity and equality of opportunity.

Denial of racism and the 'cosmopolitan canopy'

The previous analysis points towards a tension in Ashton Valley School that the students frequently had to negotiate; that is, everybody in the school claimed to have witnessed racism, yet most students also maintained that the school was a multicultural haven where everyone generally gets along. Managing this tension was most commonly achieved through denial of racism discourse strategies (Nelson, 2013; Van Dijk, 1992), which are used to construct the image of a 'cosmopolitan canopy' in which everybody consents to shared values (Anderson, 2004; Hollingworth and Mansaray, 2012). Extract

4 comes after a discussion about a girl who was bullied out of the school for being racist to another student:

Extract 4

1	Sam:	does that sort of stuff happen a lot?
2	Saliha:	no but I think [it when it-]
3	Leila:	[no n-]
4	Saliha:	it happens occasionally but,
5	Leila:	yeah but I don't think there's a lot of racism at our,
6		[school.]
7	Saliha:	[yeah] there's a lot of different people,
8	Leila:	[[yeah.]]
9	Saliha:	[[so if]] one person does it then everyone is gonna be like really,
10	Leila:	yeah like there's a load,
11		like there's loadsa like different cultures and stuff like so.
12		I don't think people are like,
13	Saliha:	[it's not gonna,]
14	Leila:	[too much] bothered about that.
15		(1.0)
16	Saliha:	gonna really.
17	Leila:	yeah,
18	Saliha:	cause they know they'll get beaten up.
19	Leila:	[yeah.]
20	Saliha:	[or] something will happen to them that [they do.]
21	Leila:	[yeah.]

My question in line 1 about 'that sort of stuff' refers to an incident in which a White girl at the school called an African Caribbean student a 'Paki' and was subsequently subjected to extensive abuse from other students via social media (note that 'Paki' is an abusive term in the United Kingdom for people of Pakistani heritage or, quite frequently, any perceived South Asian heritage, so its usage here is somewhat unconventional). This extract begins with me, the interviewer, inviting further comment upon whether racist incidents are generalisable beyond this scenario. My question could be seen as implicitly challenging the school's image as a tolerant place, thus inviting the students to address this topic in more detail. Saliha's response acknowledges that racism 'happens occasionally' (line 4), but this is followed by a number of examples that typically figure in denial of racism discourse (Van Dijk, 1992). In particular, the above extract involves a strategy that Nelson (2013) calls 'deflection from the mainstream' (p. 93). This often involves locating racism with a small number of individuals, thus defining a very narrow scope for any anti-racist activities or policies (e.g. Van Dijk, 1992: 96). The tactics of adequation/distinction provide a method for speakers to achieve this via discourse. For example, Saliha positions a hypothetically racist 'one person' against 'everyone' else (line 9), with the promise of physical violence against any racist students ('they know they'll get beaten up', line 18). In doing so, they situate acts of racism as individual idiosyncratic behaviours, which are contrasted with the collective anti-racist majority.

In this instance, the denial of racism discourse contributes towards the construction of what Anderson (2004) has called a 'cosmopolitan canopy' – the image of a congenial and multicultural social space in which everybody gets along (see Hollingworth and Mansaray, 2012 for an application of this to educational contexts). An additional discursive mechanism that was used to support such claims was the use of myth-like stories, such as the episode that triggered Extract 4, which concerned a girl who was allegedly assaulted for being racist to another student. While this event had occurred relatively recently, it had begun to acquire a somewhat 'mythical' status (Barthes, 1993 [1957]: 143), with different students providing different versions, including possible police involvement, a vigilante gang, and the accused girl moving to a different school. These social dynamics of memory may come to serve as cultural rituals that can be operationalised as discursive practices (Wodak, 2009), irrespective of their actual factual details or whether they even happened at all. Therefore, what is important is not the truth-value of the story, but how it is invoked in order to deny racism and to promote a particular 'unofficial' version of the school, in which racism is likely to be met with physical violence (Pettigrew, 2012). In doing so, any instances of racism are deflected away from the mainstream and positioned as isolated incidents by rogue individuals.

Discussion

This analysis illustrates how students in a multiethnic secondary school in England reproduce and engage with discourses about multiculturalism and ethnic diversity in education. Key to this is constructing a clear relationship between school demographics and tolerance of multiculturalism, which is used as a mechanism by the students to position themselves as tolerant citizens who are aware of the perceived demands of their future adult lives. There is evidence that some of the discourses promoted by government and educational officials are reproduced by students, such as the idea of multiculturalism as a beneficial commodity, which is unsurprising given its pervasiveness in official school parlance. However, what is notable is how other commonly identified discourses seem to be completely absent from the students' talk. For example, the notion of 'Britishness' has been a considerable focus of government policy, as well as previous research on student talk in multicultural environments (e.g. Basit, 2009; Keddie, 2014; Pettigrew, 2012; Rhamie et al., 2012). Despite this, the concept of Britishness was never discussed by any of the students in this study, nor did any of the students overtly allude to notions of a national British or English identity during the interviews. However, it is important to note that the interactions reported here are not neutral insights into the students' inner worlds, but instead represent the students and myself negotiating identity work within the context of an interview. That the students did not talk about things such as Britishness is interesting, especially when previous studies have relied upon asking such questions directly. However, what the students did and did not talk about is partly a product of how I helped to shape the interaction in collaboration with the students, as well as their orientation to the interview setting.

The major point of the analysis was to show how conflicting discourses co-exist in students' talk about multiculturalism and to explore how they negotiate these tensions

as a form of social practice. The mythical status of stories involving violent anti-racist action serve as a powerful mechanism for denying racism in the face of racist incidents, as do strategies that locate any evidence of racism in isolated incidents. Accordingly, these strategies assist in discursively constructing the school as a cosmopolitan canopy where everybody gets along. However, the analysis also revealed that particular intersections of disadvantage may be projected onto more generic notions of 'difference', while explicit talk about race and ethnicity often taps into more problematic discourses surrounding the role of additional provision for minority ethnic students. To this end, the analysis of reverse racism highlights the need for greater critical discussion about race and ethnicity among secondary school students. Given the intensification of this discourse in the British media in recent years, it is not surprising to find the ideology of 'racism against Whites' surface here (see also Bucholtz, 2011a: 399). Most students were also genuinely unaware of the intended purposes of schemes such as the Black students achievement programme. Indeed, as Extract 3 shows, some White students claimed to see the programme as a racially exclusive social group, rather than an education-oriented support scheme that used recreational activities as rewards for success. Making the students more aware of the school's own policies and practices regarding minority student support may be one method for alleviating some of the ethnic tensions that permeated parts of Ashton Valley School. It is well known that simply promoting multiculturalism via increasing a school's 'social mix' does not necessarily ensure that 'social mixing' will occur (Hollingworth, 2014: 54–89). Therefore, additional provision may also be needed in order to enter into dialogue with students who may perceive such support schemes as inequalities within the school.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article highlights some of the ways in which students negotiate the relationship between discourses of multiculturalism and their lived experiences of complex social environments. However, while these discourses allow the students to make sense of the co-existence of racism and professed anti-racism, they can also have the consequence of further perpetuating social inequalities. The commodity discourse foregrounds the benefits of multiculturalism for the already privileged and positions a diverse population as a monolithic 'other'. There is also evidence of simplistic distinctions posited between 'us/we' and 'them', in addition to situating racism in rogue individuals rather than structural or systemic forces. It is clear from this that if progressive schools in Britain wish to develop an inclusive multicultural environment that goes beyond simply creating a diverse 'social mix', then they will need to pay greater attention to engaging students in critical discourse about race, ethnicity and multiculturalism, both in the curriculum and beyond.

Declaration of conflicting interests

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Note

1. Transcription conventions are adapted from Bucholtz (2011b: xiii). Each line represents a single intonation unit:

.	end of intonation unit; falling intonation
,	end of intonation unit; fall–rise intonation
?	end of intonation unit; rising intonation
:	lengthening
[ ]	overlapping speech
[[ ]]	overlapping speech that is separate from a nearby section of overlap
-	self-interruption
hh	outbreath (each h represents one pulse of outbreath)
(.)	pause of 0.5 seconds of less
(n.n)	pause of specified duration in seconds
((comment))	transcriber comment
x	unintelligible speech; each 'x' denotes one syllable

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