

## **Abstract in English**

This is a website about race, racism and cultural aspect of everyday life as seen through the eyes of the British children and adolescents. The website presents a team of nine animated young from different backgrounds. They invite the visitor to their home where it is possible to meet their family and friends and share some experiences. The visitor can also choose to go into the virtual city of “Britchester” with them and explore conversations that happen there.

During the visit, it is possible to read about everyday life of this virtual characters and to interact with the website in a very interesting way for children and teenagers (quizzes, quotes, lyrics, and famous people from TV, sport, and music). Since there are many minority ethnic groups in the UK, each with different backgrounds and experiences, the author of the website decided to try to address some main themes and issues rather than every group's experience, because that differing experiences and histories do not just exist between ethnic groups but within them. Thus, the characters exist as vehicles for the issues not as 'representatives' of specific groups.

## **Abstract in italiano**

Si tratta di un sito web creato a partire da temi quali la razza, il razzismo e gli aspetti culturali della vita di tutti i giorni, visti attraverso lo sguardo di bambini e adolescenti inglesi. Il sito presenta un gruppo di nove giovani provenienti da contesti culturali differenti. I ragazzi invitano i visitatori a casa loro dove possono incontrare la loro famiglia e i loro amici e condividere esperienze. I visitatori possono anche scegliere di entrare insieme a loro nella città virtuale di “Britchester” e ascoltare le conversazioni che vi si tengono. Durante la visita è possibile informarsi sulla vita di tutti i giorni di questi personaggi virtuali e interagire col sito in un modo molto interessante per bambini e ragazzi (quiz, citazioni, canzoni e personaggi famosi della televisione, sport e musica). Dal momento che in Gran Bretagna ci sono molti gruppi etnici minoritari, ognuno dei quali proviene da esperienze e background differenti, l'autore del sito web ha deciso di prendere in considerazione alcuni temi principali, piuttosto che le singole esperienze di ogni gruppo. In questo modo i personaggi esistono non tanto come rappresentanti di un gruppo specifico, ma come “strumenti” per affrontare i problemi.

## **1. The practice**

### **1.1 Description of the project**

This website about racism is intended as an educational tool for use mainly in areas where young people do not have frequent contact with minority ethnic groups (though no doubt it will be of interest to others too). The issues raised on the site can be difficult to deal with in a whole class setting, and authoritative accessible resources are hard to find, therefore the site tries to answer this lack by providing a set of resources for students, teachers and educators.

The site is based around nine imaginary characters in their mid-teens, from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, and users are invited to 'hang out' with one of these characters. The characters show us their homes, introduce us to some members of their families,

and tell us something about themselves and their lives. If they are religious they give some information about their beliefs, and it's also possible to visit their respective places of worship.

On educational grounds the author decided to represent nine characters; more would be confusing to the user. Three south Asian characters were created, but left out Bangladeshi; there are two African-Caribbeans, but neither has roots in Jamaica and there is no mention of Indo-Caribbeans; a Jewish boy is represented, but of northern European refugee descent - there are many Jews of different roots. The Welsh character also has an African connection, but there are no African characters and no Celtic Scot (though the Jewish boy feels Scottish, he says). Other groups which on numerical grounds might have been included are Travellers, the Irish, east African Asians, the Vietnamese, Cypriots, and refugees of many different nationalities.

## **1.2 Time, structure and steps of the project**

The Project responded to the need of promoting a better understanding between different cultures. This necessity has shown by a national survey published in 2002, which acknowledges that there is widespread prejudice against ethnic minorities, though fewer white people than in the past say they are prejudiced themselves.

## **1.3 Place and context**

92.15% of the population of Britain (more than nine out of every ten people) gave their ethnic group as White British. This was higher in the North East, Wales and the South West, where over 95% described themselves as White British. Taking England separately, the percentage of people from minority ethnic groups has grown from 6% to 9% since 1991. Someone's ethnic group is not the same as where they were born. 87.4% of people in England (and 97% of people living in Wales) were born in Britain (Source: britkids.org).

## **1.4 Target**

The intended audience is young people who do not live or go to school in areas which are ethnically mixed, the website aims to engage and inform a group which is mostly not from minority ethnic groups themselves. Young people who have personal daily experience of multicultural Britain may find the site interesting, but it is not intended to address the details and complexities of those experiences.

For users who are from minority ethnic communities, the website author hope that it will provide some support in terms of points of view and familiar experiences. At different points in the website, there are opportunities for users to access the sites of organisations that can provide more direct support for people experiencing difficulties or discrimination in relation to 'race'.

## **1.5 Methodology**

Most of the site consists of arguments and conversations between different members of the 'cast'. They discuss harassment, relationships, the words and 'jokes' they like and don't like, public attitudes about race myths and ideas about the numbers of minorities, myths about "natural black talent" in sport and music, racism in football, crime, and discrimination.

These discussions end either in a quiz, or a "truth/dare/kiss/promise" option, where they have to engage with the material and give answers that may be factual, moral, or a matter of opinion. There are also contributions from celebrities.

There are two ways of exploring the site.

The first is by 'hanging out' with a character and just seeing what issues to do with 'race' and culture come up for them. The way to access this route is by clicking on one of the character figures and following the resulting path through the site, (the first step will be map of the town with about four of the locations highlighted). Students like this route, since they can identify with one particular individual.

The second way of exploring the site is by issue, and this is not immediately transparent to the user. In effect, the different locations in "Britchester" serve as proxies for specific issues, so the sports centre is where the visitor finds something about racism and sport, the park is where it is possible to find discussions on marriage and relationships. The Teachers' Guide chart published on the website offers full details on the way to explore the site, which serves a key to the full map of Britchester. Using this, visitors can direct individuals or groups to specific issues by asking them to 'go to' a particular location.

The author suggests that students look at the material on an individual or small group basis focusing upon particular characters or specific issues.

"Behind" the main screens and pathways through the site there are more factual pages onto which users can "click" for further information (e.g. about the law on discrimination). The curator have provided a list of these pages (Serious Issues), so you can access them directly.

The website provided a small selection of lesson plans, which can be printed and photocopied as work sheets and handouts. It brief list of backup classroom materials that we think is appropriate and useful.

## **1.6 Authors, Funding and Networks**

University of Chichester, Professor Chris Gaine, BRITKID's author.

The University has a history of teacher training and now offers a full range of degrees and has a long-standing commitment to equal opportunities (<http://www.chi.ac.uk/>).

**Comic Relief** is known for Red Nose Day, the mega-fundraising event that sweeps the UK every two years. They also make grants to projects in the UK and Africa supporting disadvantaged people. As part of its education programme, Comic Relief has co-ordinated and publicised BRITKID, and provided financial support to the site.

**1997 European Year Against Racism** was designated by the member states of the European Union. Countries in order to combat racism, promote good practices, communicate the message of tolerance, respect and understanding, and highlight the benefits of a diverse society.

## **2. HINTS FOR AN EVALUATION**

### **2.1. Strengths**

#### *2.1.1 The organisation's perspective*

This author of the website affirms that the web is the result of a project that has been thought to offer an instrument for the understanding of cultural differences. Therefore, the first strength is linked to the fact that the site addresses British young people, creating an effective and concrete occasion for the natives to learn more about cultural background of their classmates. Therefore, the main result is to help the whole community, but in particular the English one, to fight prejudices and negative stereotypes throughout the experiencing of virtual meeting and dialogues. This Project

is very innovative, firstly because of the use of ICT and of language that can be considered appealing and close to young people; furthermore, the website innovation is due to the fact that it can be used by teachers in “white schools”, where students have few occasions to meet and know other students with different background.

### *2.1.2 Interculture map perspective*

This Project is innovative because it uses the youth language so it addresses directly to them without the filter of adults. At the same time the website is not directed just at young with non British-background. This can be considered an intelligent effort to spread intercultural dialogue within the whole society, by starting with kids and teenagers. The website helps to understand how they live, by showing differences and similarities, without neglect diversity and neither by stigmatizing curiosity towards differences with exotic accent.

Furthermore the website pays attention to teachers who are guided through pages in order to allow them to use this tool at best in the classroom. In the “Serious issues” pages the author has published some useful materials for teachers who can use this product not just as a funny activity for students but as an opportunity for them to update and learn about diversity and also about national policies or other projects on this topic.

## **2.2.Critical points**

### *2.2.1 The organisation's perspective*

Having only nine characters makes oversimplification and stereotyping a constant risk. The author tried to avoid this by building in details which make the characters individuals, and illustrating some of the tensions and negotiations within their British identities: Balvinder, a Sikh girl, follows her faith but once cut her hair; Tzu Lee, a Chinese girl, wants to be a model against her family's wishes; David, a Jewish boy, is good friends with Mumtaz, a Muslim girl; Megan, a Welsh girl, is unsure about her African heritage.

At the same time, there are some contradictions in the decisions to use, or not use, statistical research to inform the characterisations whilst trying to avoid stereotyping. For example, one Chinese character can't “represent” all British Chinese people. Research shows that until recently the majority have worked in the restaurant trade, yet it could be seen as stereotyping to have Tzu Lee's family in such work. Similarly, evidence shows that Chinese young people are highly successful at getting into Oxford and Cambridge but to portray Tzu Lee aiming for this would also, arguably, be stereotyping.

The website creator could have attempted to subvert stereotypes in a more aggressive manner, by giving the characters no representative “burden” at all (the African-Caribbean girl's mother could be a barrister, the Gujerati boy's father a road sweeper, the Welsh mixed parentage girl's father a soldier in the Household Cavalry) but this would have given an entirely untypical picture and failed to make some essential points about the social ramifications of racism.

Some feedback has queried the extent to which the characters from minority ethnic groups practice their respective religions in comparison with their majority white peers. This reflects research showing that religious observance is far higher amongst minority ethnic groups with roots in south Asia, Africa and the Caribbean than amongst the rest of the population. Nevertheless, the Project decided to make some characters vague about religious details in order to distinguish them as characters rather than religious representatives. In reality not all young people would feel

capable of giving a full account of all shades of opinion within their faith. Religion is also given some prominence because (as with language), there is often confusion about factual details and both are often exploited in racist arguments.

*“ (...)There was some concern about the characters doing anything which could be criticised (having relationships without their parents' consent, talking ungrammatically, being rude to adults, watching 18-rated films and so on), since it might be seen to be condoning the acts and/or reflect badly on a particular group. There is an inevitable tension between this and trying to create fictional but realistic individuals.*

*These dilemmas the author had to cope with were further highlighted in the feedback received on draft versions. It is the nature of the topic that clear resolutions are difficult (sometimes impossible), and I have had to make some choices between contradictory options and advice (...)”* (article from the author published on the website, Chris Gaine, University of Chichester, UK, [www.chi.ac.uk](http://www.chi.ac.uk)).

### *2.2.2 Interculture map perspective*

This Project shows a high level of self-awareness about the implications of choice, both related to representation of characters and to implicit message that users receive. The description of critical aspects operated by the author is almost comprehensive. The big effort spent to create a website that could talk to students while avoiding discriminating representation is clearly evident. Sometimes, in order to adopt languages closer to the ones of young people, the website uses informal terms that can contribute to affirm the prejudice (i.e. the use of the term “Paki”, to refer to a Pakistani character). The author explains that this choice found reasons in the need for a realistic representation of dialogue among students. Some educators could not approve this approach, whilst preferring a more “cleaned-up”, or “sanitised” language, as said the author.

## **2.3. Conclusion: what is “exportable” in the project**

### *2.3.1 The organisation's perspective*

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The author had to cope with these dilemmas, that were further highlighted in the feedback received on draft versions. *“It is the nature of the topic that clear resolutions are difficult (sometimes impossible), and I have had to make some choices between contradictory options and advice”* (Source: considerations of the author's thinking, that are largely summarised in the “Serious Staff” page of the website).

### *2.3.2 Interculture map perspective*

Themes: the Project has already had a dissemination in other European countries. In fact a new transnational Project has been financed by Socrates Comenius Programme of European Commission, with good results. The Project, called “Eurokid.org”, involved Spain, Sweden, Britain and Holland, and represents a good example of exportation of one good intercultural practice. See the link listed below for details.

Methodology: the Methodology is very innovative and can be exported by inviting teachers or web-authors to use the language of kids, without avoiding the “politically un-correct” or informal terms that are used in ordinary conversations between young people. This help to make the website closer to young by talking to students while avoiding, at the same time, discriminating representations.

### **3. LINKS**

- [www.britkid.org](http://www.britkid.org)

*A website about race, racism and life - as seen through the eyes of the British kids*

- <http://www.eurokid.org/>

*An anti-racist and inter-cultural website, seen through the eyes of young people from Spain, Sweden, Britain and Holland*

- [www.irespect.net](http://www.irespect.net)

Aimed at schools and education practitioners. Promoting positive tolerance.