

# Teaching for **SOLIDARITY**

## Multiple identities in the UK

'I'm black, I live in London – that's my home. My parents are from the Caribbean but I'm really African. I'm a Christian, but I'm E7 – that's where I hang, they're my people. That's who I am.' (Year 9 pupil quoted in *Diversity and Citizenship*, Ajegbo, 2007)

Professor Manuel Castells describes our need for identity as a desire to define ourselves, our groups and communities, part of the need we have for connection and belonging, not to disappear into a 'faceless anonymous mob.' He suggests that as globalisation increases (internet, travel, media) and communities fragment, so we see more people searching for identity and defining themselves as part of a culture with a distinct language or set of beliefs, music or look. "In a world of global flows of wealth, power, and images, the search for identity -- collective or individual, ascribed or constructed -- becomes the fundamental source of social meaning." (*The Power of Identity*)

Amartya Sen, the Nobel prize-winning economist and philosopher, celebrates the complexity of human identity and writes about the murderous violence in our world - so often caused by what he calls a 'solitarist' approach to human identity and 'a miniaturization' of human beings. This is when people reduce each other to one-dimensional identity labels of race, religion and class. In his book, *Identity and Violence – The Illusion of Destiny*, Sen talks about the dangers of categorizing ourselves and 'others' with simple labels and how that can lead to herding people into 'packs' or boxes, which 'can make the world thoroughly inflammable' and cause sectarian divisions, social tension and even war :

"Many contemporary political and social issues revolve around conflicting claims of disparate identities involving different groups, since identity influences, in many different ways, our thoughts and actions....The world is increasingly seen... as a federation of religions or of civilizations...which sees human beings as members of exactly one group..., thereby ignoring all the other ways in which people see themselves. [This] approach can be a good way of misunderstanding nearly everyone in the world....With suitable instigation, a fostered sense of identity with one group of people can be made into a powerful weapon to brutalise another."

He goes on to call for people to use their "choice and reasoning" and for us to develop " a clearer understanding of our shared humanity and the pluralities of

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human identity...We have to see clearly that we can interact with each other in a great many different ways.”

Many people in the UK have multiple identities and move in and out of them with ease, they feel secure about who they are. Trevor Phillips (Chair of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights), ‘We can be more than one thing at a time depending on the context.’ And, Sonia Deol, a BBC presenter, describes her identities in this way ‘You live across two cultures and that’s life. It’s as normal as putting on a pair of shoes.’

What is identity? Is it about what you do, how you look and what you know and feel? Is it connected to the things you own or wear? Is your identity linked to ‘other’ countries? Maybe you feel you are a citizen of the world and your identity is global? What is the essence of who you are? And do you feel you are accepted for being who you are? Does it depend on who are with? What is the connection between our identities as individuals and what we share as human beings?

## **Anna, a teenager living in Nottingham describes some of her identities :**

It is impossible to have a single identity when at secondary school, because even just wearing a school uniform has the effect of making you feel as though there is something stopping you from growing up. All these adults around you have total control, and you have to conform to their rules and expectations. At the end of year 11 I was starting to feel a bit patronised, because I already felt like a young adult, and yet I was sitting in class still being treated as a child.

I see myself as making the transition from teenager to young woman. After turning 16 this summer, I realised that I want to embrace the independence that comes gradually as we get older and our parents finally realise we are growing up and becoming young people with our own beliefs and priorities. I know that it must be strange for them watching me become a young adult. I think they sometimes feel like I hardly tell them anything anymore. I try, as a daughter, to take some responsibility for things around the house, such as keeping things tidy when my mum is busy with her work, and feel that as I get older I’m doing more, as I wasn’t very helpful in my younger years!

I feel that, at the moment, being a sister is not a big part of my identity. I have found that over the last few years, my sister and I have grown apart. While I take an interest in fashion and love going salsa dancing, my sister (who is one year older than me) prefers loud rock music and heavy black make up! Unfortunately

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over the last few years, we've let domestic arguments come between our relationship, and I don't think we'll ever be able to go back to the days when we were very close.

As a friend, I am a completely different person to the one that my family sees, who is, unfortunately, often prone to bad moods, for which I hope my family can forgive me! To my friends, I don't think that I ever come across as in a bad mood; from what they have told me, I come across as patient, a good listener, and someone who thinks about the needs of others, and I am glad that this is the way that they see me. I know there are things about me that sometimes annoy them, but they forgive me, and I love them for it.'

I'm proud of my academic ability and know that I set myself high standards in my work and am very motivated; I will push myself to achieve them. I also know that there is a third person I can be, who is seen by neither my close friends nor my family. I go salsa dancing three or four times a week, and it is here that I transform into someone with much more self-confidence and the ability to chat to people openly and make friends easily. I also love the dancing so much, that when I dance I get lost in the music, and don't care who is looking at me, or what people think of me – I just start moving my hips like there's no tomorrow!

It's strange though, now that I realise the difference between the way that I am growing up, and how my parents did. While my dad had a similar middle class upbringing, my mum was brought up in a family of fourteen children, without much money, in a working class area of Derry, Northern Ireland. She didn't have the privileges that I now have, and had to work very hard for the financial security she now has. It's strange visiting all my aunts and uncles in Ireland now, many of whom live in the same estate where my mum grew up, as when I was young I was just visiting my family, but now I realise that a lot of them are people who I myself might be guilty of making judgements about when I walk down the street, based on stereotypes from the media etc. And yet they are still the same family who I love; this often makes me question these stereotypes that people might make about others from a different social class.

As regards my religion, I call myself an agnostic. Although my parents were both from religious families, neither one has ever practised a religion themselves, and they have not brought me up believing a certain way. I know that having a religion can be a comfort in times when you're feeling low, and can help people through the worst of times – and I respect the beliefs of others – but personally, I just can't get my head around the concept of something else being in control of my life. I am not, however, averse to the possibility of a God; I

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sometimes think that there must be something responsible for the amazing, intricate world we live in.

Two years ago, I went through an eating disorder, which people around me tell me was deteriorating into anorexia, although at the time I didn't see it this way. I developed a very unhealthy relationship with food, and lost a lot of weight to the point where it was seriously affecting my physical wellbeing. I would say I've pretty much fully recovered from that now, and eat very healthily, however because food became such a big part of my life for so long, I find that it is still something I think about a lot, and so to a certain extent it still has some control in my life.

I'd say that at the heart of who I am is my family and my friends. It sounds clichéd, but I really do believe that we need people close to us; everyone needs human contact to make life worthwhile, because what is the point of experiencing new and exciting things if we have no one to share them with? I love being part of such a big family, as I have nearly 50 cousins, and love spending time with them. I'm really enjoying life at the moment; I guess that many would argue that being a teenager is the most exciting time of one's life, and I'm trying to make the most of it. I hope that when I start college in September, I can leave behind all the things that I felt were holding me back at secondary school, and let people see the real, confident me, because that's how I feel inside.

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Thousands of teenagers in the UK have experienced drastic changes in their lives, moving countries often after traumatic experiences, and having to adapt in every way. Gayle Chong Kwan is an artist who wanted to explore the impact of those changes. In 2007 she worked with young people who have a common experience of living between at least two cultures. The young people were born in or their parents and grandparents were born in, a broad diaspora beyond Britain, in Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Like earlier travellers to Britain, their reasons for coming to Britain were diverse; family ties, economic prospects, political asylum and new opportunities. The young people explored images and histories of the portraits of travellers from the *Between Worlds* exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery, London. Their photos and the text they wrote about their identities were featured in the *Different Worlds - Contemporary Responses to Migration* exhibition at the NPG. Kwadwo Benko was one of the young people featured:

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Life is very strange  
Sometimes I wonder why this is  
It can be cruel and good  
And sometimes funny  
But life is very precious.

A year ago I came to London  
Leaving behind years of culture  
and some family members  
I came here to join the rest of my family  
I felt really happy.

Sadly my dad died  
His death made me think of who I was  
And the culture of my people back home  
I remember him telling me  
Where you are from is important  
So here I am  
Proud to tell you I'm from Ghana.

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Sometimes it's hard not to be defined by how 'others' see us which can affect our choices and behaviour.

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## **Sean's tag**

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Dyslexia,  
Special Needs Removal Unit, Caution, Custody, Persistent  
Youth Offender, Acceptable Behaviour Agreement, Criminal  
Damage, Racially Aggravated Burglary, Anti Social  
Behaviour Order, Crime and Disorder Act, Anger  
Management Course, Intensive Supervision

Sean's head swims with words  
They've always been his enemy  
Won't stay still on the page  
Like black demons or matchstick men  
That hop in front of his eyes, like fleas  
teasing him, moving their little letters about  
making a fool of him, making others laugh at him  
infuriating him.  
Until he discovered a way to make them do what he wanted.

If the page was big enough, the letters bold enough  
The colours no black, but crimson, emerald, sliver and jet  
With spray paint and a blank wall  
Sean could write his tag, his name  
With care, detail, artistic flair,  
A'CEE  
And other words too, words the whole of Newcastle  
Could read.

School, the Polis, Adults, Everyone  
Said he was no good, a failure, the worst  
So Sean said Right, I'll be the best  
At being Bad.  
It is his message to the world.

(from *Wall* by Ellen Phethean, pub. Marion Boyars Publishers Ltd)

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The need to know who you are, to be comfortable with that and the effect of being judged by others, affects us all in very different ways. Janet Nguyen, whose parents came to the UK from Vietnam, writes about her identity:

Going to Deptford Green School (in Lewisham, South London) was the real first place where I was in an environment in which I felt like part of the majority rather than a minority. There was a good mixture of different cultures and backgrounds in each class and that gave everyone a sense of inclusion. As we opened up, the experience of working as a team in order to achieve more, proved that we could look beyond people 'like me' and trust each other despite our differences.

Throughout the years, our knowledge of each other's backgrounds increased, the integration and acceptance of each other made us feel comfortable, so that when it was time to leave, we felt we had had enough preparation to fit into the wider society and still stand proud of our own identity at the same time.

Growing up independently without my immediate family around me, I lost a sense of my family history and the country we originated from. I no longer cared where I had come from and was not interested in the past, I was only focused on the future and where I was heading. I did not see myself as Vietnamese and had lost touch with speaking my mother tongue - I had a lot of resentment, to the point that I felt living here in the UK, I had to adapt myself in order to get noticed. It was always going to be a fight as I knew I would have to compete in order to stand out. I had the view that being Vietnamese was a disadvantage and I would always be struggling to get somewhere, in comparison to white people who would always benefit from privileges and are naturally and immediately accepted without having to prove themselves as individuals.

But on my first visit trip back to Vietnam as an adult, I met a lot of family members who welcomed me with such a strong sense of belonging, inclusion and warmth. Their lifestyle in a third world country showed me the importance of family and togetherness. Their mentality is so much purer as they do not have the same brutality and competitiveness as I find in the west. I spoke to family members, they showed me photographs, talked about our surname and told me historical stories all relating to our ancestors. This gave me a detailed insight into the struggles the country had gone through and how civilians suffered. But together as a country they pulled through to keep Vietnam from being invaded by the West.

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All these stories gave me so much more respect for the Vietnamese people. Now I realise how important my family history is to me and it has helped me grow and understand their way of life and thinking. I became very proud of who I am, my heritage and where I came from. I give thanks to my ancestors as I see that without them I would not have existed, I wanted to learn more about the family traditions and how the Buddhist religion is incorporated into their daily lives. Living and growing up in the U.K I had wanted to change my name so it was easier to pronounce amongst the English, but I realised how important my surname was to me.

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## **Discussion:**

The individuals in this piece emphasize that their identity is complex, it has many features. Sometimes they feel more like one thing than another. This is often shaped by context. Anna, for example, talks about how she is one way with her family and another way with friends. Janet reflects on her identity and the way she saw herself in London and then, later, in Vietnam. The scholar Sen, quoted above, argues the following:

“Many contemporary political and social issues revolve around conflicting claims of disparate identities involving different groups, since identity influences, in many different ways, our thoughts and actions....The world is increasingly seen... as a federation of religions or of civilizations...which sees human beings as members of exactly one group..., thereby ignoring all the other ways in which people see themselves. [This] approach can be a good way of misunderstanding nearly everyone in the world....With suitable instigation, a fostered sense of identity with one group of people can be made into a powerful weapon to brutalise another.”

He goes on to call for people to use their “choice and reasoning” and for us to develop “ a clearer understanding of our shared humanity and the pluralities of human identity...We have to see clearly that we can interact with each other in a great many different ways.”

What do you think he means by the fact that we seem to categorise each other and put each other in boxes and this prevents us from seeing what connects us as human beings? When you read this, did you find yourself agreeing or disagreeing with Sen? Why?