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## **Race Equality: Breaking the Stalemate in Library Services**

Shiraz Durrani, London Borough of Merton  
and Paul Joyce, Management Research Centre, University of North London.

The issue of equality for Black and Asian people in our society is once again moving up the local government agenda. This may not be immediately obvious from looking at social exclusion (including race) in 1999/2000 Annual Library Plans for all English libraries. However, recent events (such as those in the Stephen Lawrence case) have exposed a degree of stalemate in progress towards equality of opportunity for all races in accessing services and in employment. Against a background of fundamental changes in performance management mechanisms and public relations brought about by the Local Government Act 1999, the stalemate is being challenged in the London Borough of Merton by new strategic thinking and a determination to pursue a new approach in the council's library services.

Before we look at Merton's approach it is important to recognise that there has been a serious bottleneck nationally in the delivery of equality of opportunity for all sections of our communities. First, large parts of the community are not reached by library services. Second, not many Black (including Asian) staff are making it into professional and managerial positions within library services. Only 286 out of 20,000 members of the Library Association are Black; and only 3 of the 286 earn more than £27,000 p.a. (Khan, 1999). Third, there is a general lack of library services' policies existing to address the needs of Black communities. Why? Black communities have very little, if any, influence on library policy and practice. Inside the libraries, few qualified and experienced Black staff move beyond low levels of the organisation. Very few Black managers are in positions to influence policy and take decisions, and are generally not empowered to influence services to Black communities (Durrani, 1999).

In a stalemated situation it is very hard to bring about substantial improvements in race equality by urging everyone to show more commitment to equality and to do what they can. Strategic measures are needed. This requires a strategic vision. But more than that, it requires a stream of service development projects that result in services that better match the needs of the Black Community, and it requires the development of skills and capabilities inside the library service.

Merton library services, which is aiming to be more responsive to the needs of its Black communities that comprise 20% of the local population, has been taking the first steps to break out of the race equality stalemate. It used a Library Review carried out under best Value principles to highlight shortcomings of its current situation. These included the limited use of

outreach activities to meet the needs of black communities. It is important to note that Merton library now has a new strategic objective focused on Community Development.

Its second step is organisational development to prepare the library service for strategic measures. These are not the be-all and end-all of race equality, but they do create organisational readiness for strategic measures. The following changes are being implemented from April 2000:

A strategic manager post for Black services at equal level with other cost centre managers.

A new post of Ethnic Arts and Community Development officer.

A marketing manager post created to promote the services to the community. Each library to have dedicated staff to provide service to Black communities.

A new staff development and training strategy includes Black service development issues.

New job descriptions for all posts includes a requirement of "understanding of and commitment to equality of opportunity in employment and service delivery and to working actively to eliminate indirect and institutional racism as defined in the Macpherson Report."

Fixed media funds for Black community needs reflecting their proportion in the population; and community consultation on what is purchased.

Development of new performance indicators to reflect Black communities.

The third step is to take initiatives that keep the organisation open-minded and receptive to outside ideas. A staff work group on services to Black communities has produced a report which will be basis of community consultation and be implemented from September 2000. This uses recommendations from the Roach and Morrison report (1998), the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report (1998) and the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE, 1995). The library service is also involved in the nation-wide Public Library Policy and Social Exclusion research, and expects it will be taking on board any recommendations in future developments.

Finally, Merton library is setting up a new pilot development project for enhancing library services to better meet the new needs of the Black and Asian community. Entitled the "Quality Leaders Project for black Library and Information Workers," the key proposition is that the project itself is critical as a vehicle for developing the new know-how that a new service requires for its design and delivery. The new needs might be simply hitherto ineffective needs that were not addressed by current library services.

The feasibility phase of the project is funded by the Library and Information Commission. The service development project as a whole will be evaluated by the Management Research Centre at the University of North London. Three case studies will be undertaken – one at Merton, and two others are being sought. Comparison of the cases and analysis of the findings will enable the project's principles to be assessed in different localities.

The project's principles that are key to the new approach to improving Merton's Library services to its Black and Asian communities are:

- The need for service development projects to be guided by an assessment of the Black and Asian communities' current satisfaction with services and the scope for improving the services to them.
- The need for each service to tailor service improvements to exploit its distinctive resources as well as the public's requirements, rather than blind copying of other library services' initiatives.
- The need for the top managers of the service to lead and show commitment to making a success of the development project.
- The need to expand the experience and managerial expertise of Black and Asian library employees through working on service development projects.
- The need for top managers to win the support of all sections of the library staff, and not just the managers and professionals who have an existing commitment and sympathy to greater equality in services and employment.
- The need for the learning and growth of capability developed during service development projects to be recognised within the organisation and become the basis of increased responsibilities for Black and Asian managers and staff.

Merton library will above all else be testing out the proposition that involving Black staff in service development projects is highly effective in growing distinctive and valuable sets of know how and expertise. We think the expertise and capabilities developed through service development projects are probably difficult to acquire through traditional management training formats and more valuable as a consequence. In summary, the pilot project is an expression of the idea of a 'learning council' and offers, we believe much more than off the job training courses in management ever could to Black and Asian staff. And of course this is all within a project offering to deliver better value to the public.

## References

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**Khan, Ayub** (2000) Stamping out institutional racism. *Library Association Record* 102(1) pp. 38-39.

**Public Library Policy and Social Exclusion Project.** Details about the research project are available at <http://www.lmu.ac.uk/ies/dmudd/dmudd1.htm> or from Project Contact, Rebecca Linley, School of Information Management, Leeds Metropolitan University, The Grange, Beckett Park Campus, LEEDS L56 3Q5. Tel 0113 2832600x 3661.

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