

How can diversity translate into practice in primary schools?

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Mistry and Sood (2015) see diversity categorised into visible and non-visible groups. Visible denotes difference between us like, disability and differences in age, race, colour and ethnicity. Whereas religion, beliefs, political views and economic status could be regarded as non-visible traits. These differences influence the way we view the world, solve problems and perceive others. Therefore, any labelling or categorisation of children into groups can be potentially problematic.

The term diversity is both contentious and fluid. It brings cohesion which leads to celebration or as Public Health England (2016, p.12) reported low life satisfaction for black and Asian young people compared to young people who are white, therefore



such inequalities need addressing urgently in our more diverse and changing school environments. Two main issues need addressing by leaders in primary schools in England: firstly, that children will become increasingly diverse and secondly, they will have distinctive

and overlapping multiple identities. Yosso (2005) suggests it is probable that this may lead to disadvantaged experiences and educational success or oppression of diverse communities, like black and other minority groups, if these issues are not addressed.



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Link to theory

Addressing diversity through the lens of normative theories like Critical Race Theory focuses on understanding educational inequality and structural racism based on white privilege leading to the marginalisation of people of colour. Critical Whiteness Studies (looks at what is whiteness linked to ‘unspoken privileges’, Nayak, (2007, p.738) and Socio-cultural theory (arguing that humans interact through various cultures and activities, Mercer and Howe, 2012), have neither advanced or offered any real pace to theory or practice.

With the dynamics of migration, we are seeing children having multifaceted identities ‘encompassing occupational, class, regional, local, gender, religious, political and economic factors, requiring cultural coherence (Barbour, 2000, p.9). Language is one common framework that binds ethnic and national identities. So, we need to empower children to use their language(s) to ‘deal confidently and fairly with each other and with others in an unjust society’ (Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke, 2001, p.5).

Whatever the denomination of settings, religious equality should lead to social cohesion, safety for minority ethnic groups and tolerant society (Hammad and Shah, 2018). According to Lumby and MacRuairc (2018), we need education process that ‘focuses on an explicitly inclusive approach to difference and diversity’ (p. 4). For BME



children of different faiths/religions, wearing a turban or niqab, may render faith visible, thus denote difference, provokes a reaction, and consequent discrimination which can affect their school experience. Goffman (2009) explores the notion of a stigmatised identity, requiring action by practitioners if such behaviour is noticed.

Link to practice

Leaders in primary schools need to continue to ensure that the practitioners show adaptable and flexible leadership where they maximise their ability in tackling complex challenges that diversity may bring. So, for example, they need to address quickly any derogatory language which negatively labels or stigmatises groups such as those with English as an Additional Language

(EAL). As diversity is still strongly associated with the racial groups it is not only an academic issue, but also a political issue if the less privilege children (black and other minority ethnic) fail while mainly the majority white learners do much better.

Primary schools need a culture that promotes diversity in the classroom and outside it, where all children are taught to respect every child for their uniqueness and taught how to work with each other through blended learning strategies, peer-peer dialogic groupings and by providing a safe space to be able to talk about differences and their implications. This is likely to teach children to value and appreciate different viewpoints and improve their critical thinking skills. The teaching materials need to be



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examined for bias/stereotyping and to prepare materials to address inequality by challenging discrimination whenever it occurs. Practitioners need to reflect on how they embrace diversity in story-telling and re-telling by children by talking to each other. Primary schools are very good at forging home school links and their policy needs to ensure it reflects and celebrates their diversity. In 2018, Carver-Thomas found that having practitioners of colour increased the academic performance of children of colour. Here, maybe an assumption is that because diverse children felt more comfortable seeing diverse practitioners and therefore they felt more secure in their learning. Furthermore, supporting professional development opportunities further allows embracing diversity.

Potential debate

Practitioners may feel vulnerable because of fear of the unknown as they may not have had much experience in managing diverse children therefore, their actions may be based on stereotype 'notions'. Hence, inclusion needs to be promoted by recognising difference, acknowledging diversity amongst children and wanting to respond to personalised and community needs. To change minds and hearts, practitioners need to want to help people to change, to work together in supporting, challenging and building new, different outcomes for children. Reimagining this vision

is scary but exciting with strong leadership and holistic approach to managing diversity.

Responding to diversity means being inclusive which implies meeting individual needs in a holistic way, not just isolated adapted learning. Positively promoting diversity through the images, curriculum, appropriate assessment, monitor impact of settings policies on learners of different racial groups, using sensitive language, complying with current legislation and reports from 2000 onwards, being a role model, feeling included, safe, valued- thus promoting self-esteem and well-beingness (Bloch et al., 2019). Practitioners need to feel confident in debating the notion of Britishness and British values (DfE, 2014) of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual

respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs and what this means in practice for them. We need to work through our own attitudes, feelings, values and language, and ask ourselves – do I believe in the value of diversity and reflect on human rights values (Struthers, 2016).

As an ethnic minority researcher and practitioner, what is interesting is that children do not perceive diversity in the same way as practitioners. The perspective of some diverse children is to try and be the same as their peers and to be treated in the same way by being given the same work so that they are not perceived by their peers as being anymore different than they already are. This implies that the debate should be looking at what children like and what they need to help them



improve their outcomes which should stem from the children themselves.

Conclusion

In conclusion, maybe some practitioners in primary settings in England find it difficult to manage the ethnic diversity with all the diverse complexities of

poverty, educational support and general lived conditions found in their setting. Anecdotally, there are indications that leaders may prefer less diversity because it is too difficult to manage in the performance driven culture. However, let us embrace diversity and learn from each other and especially from children themselves.

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Pen Portrait

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