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Diversity and Social Justice – Beyond Motherhood and Apple Pie

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ABSTRACT

The majority of teachers are aware that inequalities impact on the lives of individual pupils. For others, there is also deeper awareness of how inequalities impact at community and societal levels. For those who work in areas of multiple deprivation, many are reminded on a daily basis of the ‘everydayness’ of coping or survival for their pupils and their families. However, research has also found that teacher and student teacher confidence levels on addressing equality and discrimination issues vary depending on the issue and the context. This article considers why it is important for teacher personal commitment to equality issues to be underpinned by an understanding of social justice concepts and frameworks.

Key words: diversity, discrimination, identity, micro-invalidation, teacher confidence, diverse learners, social justice and education

INTRODUCTION

Over three decades of engaging in research and professional development of equality issues, I have found that teachers have often developed a personal vision of how they might ensure greater equity in the classroom. This largely comes from adapting practice in the classroom such as the adopting of a different range of instruction methods to connect with diverse learners, embedding equality examples into curriculum content to proactively ensuring the choice of reading materials draw from diverse authors, images and perspectives. For those in leadership positions, some of these changes have been taken at a whole school and structural level such as diverting funds to setting up and maintaining breakfast clubs, enabling children from marginalised backgrounds to retain contact with the school through summer provision, setting aside welcoming and dedicated space in the school for parents and carers and diverting funds to the appointment of key roles such as that of a home-school liaison teacher or worker. Many of these examples were not unique or high status acts but each provided a small step towards tackling inequality.

Social justice is both a process and a goal. The goal of a vision of a society where we can each contribute to the best of our ability, where the distribution of resources is fair and where we can each be safe, healthy and happy is one we all

aspire to. As educators, our focus is on how educational processes can assist us to reach that goal.

Research has found that teacher and student teacher confidence levels on addressing equality and discrimination issues vary depending on the issue and the context (Arshad *et al.*, 2005; Arshad, 2008; Hicks *et al.*, 2011). Having to engage with the unfamiliar is likely to be more daunting than engaging with issues which chime with some your own lived experience. For example, research tells us that a largely homogenous teaching workforce which is white and monolingual remains largely unprepared for adapting practice for pupils from ethnically, culturally, linguistically and religiously diverse backgrounds (Marx, 2006; Hicks *et al.*, 2011).

However, Cooper (2003) reminds us that a teacher's belief of what is possible mattered more than their ethnicity, gender or other characteristics. In her depth study of effective White teachers within Black communities, she concluded that a teacher's refusal to accept stereotypes or deficit views of particular types of pupils helped these teachers develop some form of 'synchronisation' and empathy with pupils they were teaching.

Teachers I have met over the years have largely based their commitment to tackling inequalities on a strong sense of fairness, taking forward what they perceive to be correct practice based on intuition or intuitive appraisal of a situation rather than routinely on any intellectual consideration of social justice concepts or theoretical frameworks.

The lack of conceptual frameworks did not prevent evidence of efforts in the area of equity and anti-discrimination but what my own research has highlighted is that a lack of engagement at an intellectual and conceptual level might lead to inconsistent, confused or ad hoc practice. Let me introduce you to Catherine (referred to in the thesis as Teacher A), a teacher I had several long conversations with as part of my doctoral study. I do not think Catherine's story is unique.

CATHERINE – COMMITTED, PASSIONATE AND VOCAL ABOUT SOCIAL JUSTICE

Catherine grew up in a rural town where as she put it, 'you knew the pecking order of where you fitted in' (Arshad, 2009:136). She was the first in her family to move into tertiary education. As a child, she was streamed into the top classes. She shared that the community she came from had clear views about the roles of boys (men) and girls(women) and she had been subjected to stereotyping about her ability as a girl and later as a working woman. She had experience of being in an abusive relationship which resulted in her become a single parent. As a single parent, she faced stigmatisation and through these life experiences Catherine had become very vocal about matters of gender. She ensured that gender issues were discussed in her primary classroom and she was proactive in ensuring that her pupils were provided opportunities to aspire to the best of their abilities regardless of their gender or social class.

Yet, Catherine indicated that on matters of 'race', she felt too much had been done in this area and a focus on difference was divisive.

I just want to say a little thing about race and these issues. I think they have concentrated too much on it. They have picked people out for being different. I spend my time making everyone the same and it is brought up all the time (Arshad, 2009: 174).

Nevertheless, as an active trade unionist, Catherine shared that she took forward multicultural policies for her school, knowing intrinsically it was the right thing to do. She had however never explored issues of racism, its historical or current manifestations and had not really considered connections between 'race' and class or gender.

Reflecting on my conversations with Catherine, it is clear that we cannot make assumptions that passion and knowledge of one equality area would necessarily lead to an ability to apply the same lateral leaps to other equality issues. Catherine was not unusual in my group of teacher participants and there were others that also demonstrated clear commitment for social justice matters but their thoughts and practices were not applied consistently on the range of equalities issues. It also made me wonder if Catherine's commitment to justice and her activist orientation could have been even more effective had she been provided with the intellectual tools, conceptual framework and terminology to grapple with matters of diversity, inclusion and social justice.

If we accept that 'teaching is non-linear, holistic and not fully predictable activity that is more than the sum of its parts' (Grudnoff *et al.*, 2017) then we understand the work of a teacher to be highly complex. The ability to adapt and think on your feet (and to know why you are doing so) as opposed to following a template unquestioningly becomes very important. Understanding social justice concepts provides a framework to understand why inequalities occur, to provide a basis on how we meet the daily challenges we face as educators and hopefully in more effective and consistent ways.

FEATURES FOR FRAMING THINKING AND PRACTICE

In the area of tackling inequalities, there is often a reluctance to talk about issues of discrimination. This might be particularly acute in Scotland where there is a powerful narrative and natural belief of a country that is equitable, fair and welcoming. There is therefore a desire to accentuate the positive rather than dwell on the uncomfortable. Words like diversity and inclusion are used far more readily than words like discrimination and exclusion. In such a context, we need to be confident and mature enough to guard against these 'feel good' words becoming ubiquitous clichés that we all subscribe to but are less clear what this means at an everyday level.

For example, does a term like 'diversity' mean the same thing for everyone one? Obviously not. Anna Holmes (2015), a New York Times journalist citing the work of demographer Reynolds Farley from the University of Michigan, exemplifies how the state of diversity means different things to different people. Farley found in his study of economic issues in Detroit that for most African-Americans he surveyed, a perception of genuine 'integration' would be a 50/50 mix of white and black in the neighbourhood while for the majority of his white participants, such a ratio would be too high for their comfort. Farley's study also showed that as neighbourhoods became more diverse, white populations were

moving out of those neighbourhoods. It is likely that many of those surveyed would not disagree that diversity exists but only some would welcome such diversity.

While it might be more comfortable to talk about diversity or inclusion, we need to ensure we are not engaging in what Causey *et al.* (1999: 34) describes as 'naïve egalitarianism'. Such an approach would view the concepts of diversity and equality in unproblematic ways. Such thinking is often premised on a belief that as long as we treat everyone the same, there will be fairness. Naïve egalitarianism overlooks that some people may have privileges and others might have less as a result of a combination of various characteristics such as gender, ability, age, sexual orientation, colour or circumstances such as social class, religion and belief, geography and so on.

For educators, keen to ensure a more socially justice orientation, there are key features that would be helpful to name and work with. I am not going to list social justice theories or debate the merits of different writers. However, I do consider some of the following features to be building blocks for us to consider in taking forward social justice thinking and practice.

The first feature is an acknowledgement and understanding that inequalities have a history. How society has been organised over hundreds of years impact on us today. For example, colonialism has ensured 'race' has been used as an organising concept to decide who is seen as part of 'us' and who is not. It has played into present day discourse around immigration, Islamophobia and so on. The impact of patriarchy has impacted on women's rights and to this day women face gender pay gaps across the world and men and women continue to grapple with stereotypical gender expectations. The corrosiveness of capitalism has led some to have access to economic and social power but many more to have much less. Histories of inequality impact globally but play out differently at local levels. Incorrect views or stereotypes passed on from generation to generation can in time reappear as facts. Current discussions about positive action cannot be fully understood unless such discussions are located within some understanding of long-standing injustices and why some measures are now being put in place to correct these previous injustices. Knowing the historical roots of inequalities enables us to see the macro picture as we consider how we tackle issues at the micro (classroom) levels. It also assists us to contextualise the gains such as women winning the vote, how apartheid was dismantled, the legacy of the civil rights movement, how lesbian and gay people acquired legal rights to be who they are and the list goes on.

The second feature is to understand that inequalities or injustices restrict people's life chances, sense of self and purpose. For example, historical and systematic discrimination of Roma people have resulted in this group being socially excluded with many facing 'extreme poverty, destitution and disenfranchisement' (European Commission, 2014) regardless of which country they are in. One of the consequences of being in dire poverty is likely to be poor nutrition which will affect learning. Systematic segregation and marginalisation impacts on esteem leading to potential participation and retention rate issues. Having an understanding of how injustices impact can assist us to move away from deficit views of individuals, communities or groupings that are fed to us daily through misinformation or deliberate attempts to discriminate. Children damaged

by poverty and who appear less able need to be given opportunities to overcome contextual inequity rather than being routinely offered low-challenge tasks in schools (Wrigley, 2012).

Philosopher and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon talked of his great concern when those on the receiving end of negative messages begin to internalize such messages. Fanon in his writings talk about how the black man can internalize the superiority of whiteness and how this negative dynamic leaves a print on future life opportunities and aspirations. Moving away from a 'race' example, we can look at the impact of heterosexism (homophobia). Heterosexism is not just internalized by straight people but also by gay people resulting for some in depression, shame and other outcomes. As educators, if we understand the power of internalization, we can begin to understand why it is important to counter such negativities via the formal and hidden curriculum in a pro-active way. It is not about 'favouring' minority groups, it is about putting right historical inaccuracies and countering contemporary negative bias and prejudices.

A third feature is to understand the dynamics of domination, hierarchy and privilege. As individuals we hold multiple and cross-cutting memberships of different groups. For example, I am a woman and also from a visible minority group. Both these categories are not viewed as power-holder groups. However, my age and professional status levels accords me certain privileges and opportunities. The age and status benefits do not assist me to overcome the systemic disadvantage within a UK context of being viewed as 'other' because of how I look. Therefore, as a senior academic within a University, I may not face naked racism but in the street, I have faced racial abuse because of how I look and more recently, assumptions about my faith and nationality. Power and privilege are relative and when we engage with social justice issues, there is a need to adopt a sophisticated lens which recognizes that it is about power, access to power and the implementing and maintenance of such power. Social justice would seek to dismantle historical relationships of dominance and privilege.

In sessions exploring the concept of inclusion, I often asked teacher participants to first identify how exclusion might occur as part of learning and teaching. This enables participants to consider concepts like assimilation, stereotyping, tokenism, sanitization, invisibility, marginalization, exploitation as well as larger concepts like racism, homophobia, sexism, sectarianism and so on. Participants are asked to consider how some of these concepts play out in a classroom or school situation. For example, our use of words to describe situations can have unintended bias, such as the 'busy, bustling streets of Toronto' and 'the congested, crowded streets of Delhi' and so on. Describing a process using heterosexist or sexist words can marginalize, stereotype and discriminate such as 'Magnets have two ends, referred to as north and south poles. Opposite poles attract such as male to female. Similar poles such as male and male repel'. The process of discussing these various concepts and identifying examples helps educators to become more familiar with understanding how exclusion works on an everyday and often unconscious basis. In turn, this enables us to identify action that we can take to be more inclusive. I would suggest that it would be difficult to genuinely include if we do not first identify the different ways that people might be excluded.

It is equally important to reflect on exclusion at different levels from the micro to the macro. This is important given that we are all shaped by what happens in society and we do not enter the classroom as a clean slate, devoid of views or attitudes. As educators, we come with a bundle of knowledge shaped from our childhood to our adult personal and professional experiences. If we are to engage critically in transformation for social justice, we need to find spaces to have what Alsup (2006: 77) describes as 'borderland discourse'. Borderland discourse is where we connect personal views, experiences and subjectivities to our professional ones. It is a space we need to enter in order for us to explore who we are, how we make sense of what we know, which aspects of ourselves need to be troubled or possibly deconstructed and which experiences can we harness.

For example, going back to Catherine, spaces for 'borderland discourse' or dialogues would have enabled Catherine to reflect on her life experiences and to connect these to issues she had been less familiar with such as that of 'race'. It would have also assisted her to then consider how she might utilize that understanding to help her deal with complex relationships and situations within her classroom as well as being more aware of possibilities but also contradictions.

Long (2004: 141) found that a key to building teacher confidence to 'negotiate beyond the status quo' and to 'effect change was directly related to a teacher's ability to express understandings of theory and practice' (op cit., 149). Teachers who were able to problematize terms like inclusion and to consider issues of power, particularly institutional power were more able to identify and articulate the tensions that do come with trying to ensure social justice in practice.

A study by Gurdnoff and colleagues (2017), which involved a cross-cultural and cross-country analysis of the key features of teaching practice that best enabled teaching for equity as well as addressing issues of unequal educational outcomes, concluded that there were six facets of practice to consider. The six facets are:

- Facet 1: Selecting worthwhile content and designing and implementing learning opportunities aligned to valued outcomes
- Facet 2: Connecting to students as learners, and to their lives and lived experiences
- Facet 3: Creating learning–focussed, respectful and supportive learning environments
- Facet 4: Using evidence to scaffold learning and improving teaching
- Facet 5: Adopting an inquiry stance and taking responsibility for professional engagement and learning
- Facet 6: Recognising and seeking to address, classroom, school and societal practices that reproduce inequity.

Space does not permit to go into all facets so I will explore Facet 2 and 6 in more detail.

LIVED REALITIES

To respond to Facet 2, a key question we have to ask ourselves is how much we know about the lives of our pupils, their families and communities. Here I want to draw on recent research I was involved in looking at the everyday lives of minority ethnic young people in Scotland (Hopkins *et al.* 2015). This research was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and led by the University of

Newcastle in partnership with the University of Edinburgh and the University of St Andrews. The fieldwork undertaken from 2014-15 explored the everyday experiences of black and minority ethnic young people living in Scotland. We were particularly interested in exploring the experiences of young people who were mistaken as Muslim and also to explore issues of racism and Islamophobia. The study involved interviews and focus groups with 382 young people aged between 12 and 25.

A key theme that emerged was that of misrecognition. Our research provided many examples of simply 'not recognising' who the other person is. Donald (his chosen pseudonym) was a secondary pupil in a school in greater Glasgow.

...Most people actually do [think I am Muslim]. Like, and our RE teacher once thought I was a Muslim because of my skin colour. Then, yeah and when I first came to this school some of my friends now were shocked that I was a Catholic. They thought I was Muslim as well. (Donald, Indian, male, 12-15, Greater Glasgow).

As the researcher spoke with Donald, we learn about how Donald's friends could not comprehend how Donald being brown-skinned and Asian could also be Catholic. His peers repeatedly quizzed him about his religion, about his parents' religion and of the authenticity of Donald being Catholic. However, this was not the only level of misrecognition affecting Donald. The research team had visited Donald's school and we had asked for several focus groups including one specifically for young Muslim boys. This was when we met Donald. He had been sent to the Muslim boys focus group. It was not until the researcher looked at the self-classification form that each young person filled in that this misclassification came to light. This was within a school that was positive about research, had enabled access to the research team and were also concerned about issues of diversity and justice.

In another school in Aberdeenshire in the north of Scotland, we meet a group of Sikh young female pupils.

I remember when I first made like one of my friends like someone like two years ago, and she was like, 'what are you?' And I was like, 'well Sikh'. She was like, 'what like a Muslim?' And I was like, 'no like Sikh'. And she was like, 'is that not the same as Muslim?' And I was just like, 'Oh God, no!' And she was like, 'I don't get it, so you are Muslim'. 'No', people actually just think that if you are brown, you are Muslim. (Sikh focus group, female, 16-18, Aberdeenshire).

In both examples, misrecognition signalled a lack of recognition of diversity coupled with assumptions of who people are because of how they look. If these were single instances, then swift intervention to correct any misconceptions would set matters right. However, repeated misrecognition, which was a feature not just for Donald and the Sikh female pupils but for many young people in our study, would suggest that misrecognition is a live theme that educators need to grapple with. Hopkins *et al.* (2017:3) suggest that these incorrect readings of the 'other' has 'significant consequences for people's ability to live together and share everyday places comfortably'.

The question then as educators is how we open up opportunities for pupils to engage with the concept of misrecognition and by extension to assist pupils to understand recognition which is an affirming act. How can education assist pupils to robustly reflect on why we recognise some groups or individuals but render

others invisible? As educators, what are the consequences for our learners of not connecting to their lived experiences as suggested in Facet 2.

The examples I have selected relate to aspects of faith, ethnicity and colour. However, the concept of misrecognition could also be applied to other diversity areas such as the misrecognition that everyone is straight or that people from certain postcodes have particular attitudes or characteristics. If we can find spaces in our curriculum to educate for mutual recognition, to consider how misrecognition impedes participation then such educational experiences will be positive steps to achieving that social justice goal.

GOING BEYOND THE OBVIOUS: ADDRESSING DAILY MICRO-INVALIDATIONS

Facet 6 challenges us to recognize and address practices that perpetuate inequity. The experiences of Donald and the Sikh pupils are examples of daily micro-invalidations which erode self-worth and esteem which in turn could impact on well-being. Here I want to locate the term micro-invalidation within a wider concept of 'micro-aggression' and to consider why these terms are important to educators for social justice.

As part of disseminating the research on the everyday experiences of minority ethnic young people, we held continuous professional development sessions with teaching staff and provided a briefing for teachers (Arshad, Moskal and The Educational Institute of Scotland, 2016). What we found was the majority of teachers who attended the sessions were engaged and willing to learn. Many had worked on multicultural and anti-racist issues for years and were largely confident that they would address issues of overt racism such as name calling or the use of racist terminology. However, there was clearly less awareness of low-level racism and how this was impacting on the everyday lives of their pupils.

The concept of 'micro-aggressions' was developed by psychiatrist Chester Pierce in the 1970s. This concept has been developed by a range of academics namely Daniel Solarzano and Derald Wing Sue. I want to draw on the work of Sue, a psychologist and educator who unpacked that concept and suggested that micro-aggressions can occur in three different ways.

- Micro-assaults
- Micro-insults
- Micro-invalidations

Micro-assaults are overt, obvious and easiest to recognize. These are deliberate acts of discrimination. Many teachers, even the ones least confident on equality issues would seek ways to address these.

Micro-insults are more subtle and are generally not felt or recognized by those not on the receiving end of such insults. For example, being snubbed. In general, it is the person being snubbed that most acutely feels it. However, if the snub becomes repeated and frequent, then these snubs can impact as a form of micro-aggression. Within an education context, a teacher who repeatedly fails to call on the contributions of particular pupil because their names are hard to pronounce in favour of those with easier names will be conveying to those pupils being ignored that their contributions are unimportant.

Micro-invalidations are ways we exclude, negate or marginalize. When someone describes that they feel excluded or discriminated only to be told that they are over-sensitive or inaccurate in their assessment of a situation could be seen as an example of invalidating someone's feelings or the importance of their experiences.

While Pierce, Solarzano and Wing Sue's work draws from examples related to 'race', the concepts can be applied to the range of diversity issues. As educators, it is important for us to reflect on how we might educate and act to minimize daily aggressions or invalidations for our pupils and also for ourselves as staff.

In order to be able to do this, we need to start by reflecting what life and professional resources we bring to our work. What issues are we comfortable with and which are ones we need more information or insights to empower us to engage with the issues. Are we aware of our own prejudices and also our privilege? How willing are we to take risks? Opening up spaces for talking about difficult, sensitive or controversial issues will change pupil and peer perceptions of us, some positively and some negatively.

RESEARCH AND PRACTICE: A POWERFUL COMBINATION

There is no such thing as a neutral education process. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the 'practice of freedom', the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.

(Richard Shaull, 1972, in his foreword to Paulo Freire's book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*).

Educators should already be familiar with a range of theories about learning styles, social identity and cognitive development as well as having a repertoire of pedagogical approaches to draw from to facilitate discussions and learning. This toolkit of theories and approaches will be useful in informing how we might anticipate and understand pupil reactions to social justice matters and how we might use the overall curriculum to stimulate learning in this area. Embedding social justice into practice is not a neutral activity. If there is to be impact, content should be cognitively challenging at both personal and intellectual levels. There will be a need to create sufficient tension so that learning takes place and complacency is disrupted.

Keeping up with research, writings and current events will enable us to be better prepared to consider social justice manifestations, inter-relationships and action within our work. Research provides evidence that can be usefully used to open up discussions and learning. For example, take this quote from a secondary male member of staff discussing racism with his pupils.

And they took me to one side and said 'Mr X, what you've got to realise is that we don't have those (racial) issues here. We have other serious issues to do with religion. And the students alerted me to the biggest tensions they saw were those between religious groups and particularly typified by football allegiance. (Male, secondary) (Hicks *et al.*, 2011).

This quote, drawn from a research study I was part of exploring the views of teacher educators, opens up discussions about how different equality issues might intersect, the reality of 'door-step issues' and how we might use an immediate issue to consider other areas of inequality or discrimination.

Research on the perception of young lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered on their everyday experiences (LGBT Youth Scotland, 2012), the experiences of pupils for whom English is another language (Anderson *et al.*, 2016) or the views of children and young people with disabilities on their access to education (Woolfson *et al.*, 2007) are examples of research which provide opportunities to hear the voices of young people. Research quotes and data can be used to stimulate work with pupils on how they might wish to engage with the challenge of ensuring inclusivity and to recommend the types of policy and structural changes in the future which would enable greater access and equity. Different subject areas will be able to draw on research differently drawing from both quantitative and qualitative evidence.

I have long advocated that ordinary teachers can become effective change agents. Change does not have to be spectacular, small changes can be effective if sustained and built upon. Nieto (2000: 180) suggests that if we are to be relevant for diverse learners then we need to place 'equity front and centre'.

This article has suggested that to enable us to place 'equity front and centre' we need first and foremost to engage with social justice histories and concepts. This is required to avoid conceptual ambiguities and ad hoc practice. Cochrane-Smith *et al.* (2016: 68) reminds us that there is a need to define what 'practice for equity' means with an understanding that practice for social justice must prioritise those who are traditionally marginalised or excluded by the system. To do this, this paper suggests that understanding how micro-aggressions/invalidations are occurring on an everyday basis is part of that process of defining 'practice for equity'. The examination of how micro-invalidations are occurring needs to happen via different lenses understanding the specificities of each characteristic of gender, age, disability, colour, ethnicity and so on but also understanding the intersection and connectedness of these. Finally, there is a need to draw on professional knowledge of learning theories and pedagogical approaches to construct curriculum that enables learners to critically engage with issues of diversity, discrimination and equity and to develop the political literacy that is so urgently required in a world where evidence and fiction have become blurred.

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