

## Diversity in Education: Engaging Learners in Dialogue about Difference

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### Introduction

*'Nine out of 10 gypsy and traveller children have suffered racial abuse'*

(The Independent, 22 October 2014)

*'Britain swamped by Asylum seekers'*

(The Daily Mail, 22 December 2014)

These types of headlines are common and many newspapers and websites provide similar claims that reveal prejudices about the diverse groups that make up our society. In this article we provide an account of how we designed and taught a module to support Year 3 undergraduate students to examine the issues of difference and diversity in a supportive environment. The module is taught in the final year of an undergraduate course at a post-1992 Midlands university and focuses on a wide range of diverse groups such as those highlighted in the opening quotes.

We are committed to providing opportunities for learners to explore the diversity in society and the societal changes this produces so they may challenge ill-founded assumptions and develop understandings about living and working in a diverse society (Cole et al., 2011; Garci and Van Soest, 2000). This, together with our experiences of working with marginalised children and young people, has driven our desire to ensure we prepare our graduates to enter work well placed to understand and meet the needs of marginalised groups. We also wanted to challenge our learners' perceptions of what it might be like to be 'excluded' from society and to identify and question possible personal and societal assumptions.

Across the Higher Education sector, our own institution included, the last few years have seen an increasing emphasis on ensuring that learners are fully prepared to enter the workplace. Smith and Wolf-Wendel (2005) and Sciame-Giesecke et al. (2009) highlighted that educational establishments are now expected to prepare learners to work and live in a diverse world. Garcia and Van Soest develop this further, arguing that in order to prepare learners to become '*multiculturally competent professionals*' (2014: 21) they need to be taught about oppression, social identity, racism, economics and political systems. They also suggest this may require learners to examine and reflect on their personal experiences and to confront their own prejudices and assumptions. Reflection is an important tool in this process as it supports learners' understandings and helps them to develop new insights into their own and others behaviour (Ghaye, 2013). We believe the notion of engaging learners in critical debate and reflection is fundamental in the preparation of future practitioners who are capable of supporting the needs of diverse groups. Against this backdrop we designed a module to support learners to examine issues of difference and diversity. This paper details some of the activities and processes we used. Whilst our work takes place within a university environment, the strategies and concepts we use could be adapted and used with a range of learners in different contexts.

### **The course**

The concept of supporting learners develop their skills and knowledge with regard to equality and diversity in education was a key starting point when we designed and delivered the course.

Our course attracts undergraduates from a diverse range of backgrounds with many being first generation entrants and coming from disadvantaged backgrounds as identified by the proxy postcode deprivation index (NTU 2015) . Indeed for the cohort as a whole 29.6% were classified in this way, compared with 24.2% for all undergraduate courses at NTU. Our observations suggest learners who apply for our course already have some understanding of the issues of diversity and 'difference' and many of them have experienced some form of social or educational exclusion. We believe this background appreciation helps when we ask learners to use their experiences and reflections to consider issues of social justice.

The focus in Year 1 is to help the learners develop an understanding of key concepts with regard to inclusion and exclusion including investigating the use of labels, educational strategies for including 'excluded' learners, and attitudes towards SEN and

disability. The focus in Year 2 is to explore a range of issues that specifically impact on disabled peoples' lives and the importance of social and educational inclusion. Learners also critically examine a range of inclusive strategies and are encouraged to reflect on their effectiveness. The final year module aims to develop learners' knowledge and understanding about a broad range of diversity issues within education.

In designing this final year module we were guided by the following principles:

- Teaching about diversity helps to develop complex thinking skills and an interest in wider social justice (Sciame-Giesecke et al.,2009)
- Structured class activities help to develop learners' problem solving skills and as a consequence helps them to address new ideas and confront social injustice (Gittermann, 1991).
- A diverse rich curriculum needs to include a number of components such as listening to the *voices* of people from diverse backgrounds, examining how we value difference and promoting transformative thinking where ideas, views and assumptions are challenged (Cohen and Mullenix, 2007).

We bring these elements together in our year three diversity module in order to prepare our learners to enter the world of work.

### **Year 3 module: Diversity in Education**

The Year 3 module aims to support learners in becoming reflective and critical thinkers and to develop holistic, well-rounded understandings about diversity and inclusion and their links to social justice. We want learners to be able to critically evaluate different perspectives claimed to contribute to educational inequality and the strategies that might be successful in combatting inequality. We explore questions such as: Who are the diverse learners in our education system? What are the key barriers to educational inclusion for such learners? What strategies might be useful in overcoming these barriers?

The module includes coverage of named educationally vulnerable groups including Gypsy/Roma and Travellers, refugee and asylum seekers, pupils whose first language is not English, children in public care, young carers, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) young people, teenage mothers and young offenders. We also consider educational inequalities associated with race, ethnicity, gender and social class. These foci provide a context within which to develop understandings about stigma and

stereotype and the role they play in feeding prejudice and discrimination. Issues of identity, and in particular, intersectionality, are also critically important (Choudry, 2014; Bhopal and Preston, 2012). We want learners to understand that there are no simple or straightforward solutions to deeply entrenched social inequalities, some of which are mediated through education. We also want learners to see the transformative potential of education in promoting social justice and our sessions include practical strategies that might be employed to support different learners.

### **Strategies for exploring 'difference' and exclusion**

The concept of 'difference' is a key theme throughout our course. In our teaching we aim to start with the learners' own knowledge and experiences. We believe this provides a useful foundation which enables learners to make meaningful links to the broader issues. For example, a very simple paired exercise involves asking learners to share and discuss a time when they felt excluded, 'different' or as if they did not belong. Themes common to these experiences of exclusion, such as the importance of a sense of belonging, respectful treatment, and non-judgemental attitudes, are then identified. We find this is particularly useful for raising awareness of the affective dimensions associated with exclusion.

This is followed by a second paired discussion which invites learners to consider the question, 'in what ways are we different from each other?' The result usually includes a wide range of characteristics and, as a group, we usually learn some things about other group members that we did not know. This question is a useful way of highlighting the many ways in which we are similar to, yet simultaneously different from, each other; that some differences are visible while others are not, and that differences that are considered 'normal', have no impact on one's life, while other differences can have a profound influence. The discussion is then broadened to consider society, prompting learners to identify 'differences' that are less openly discussed (for example social class); those people might want to hide (for example a mental health condition); or that are considered less desirable in some way (for example, being on benefits). In analysing why this might be the case, important themes associated with prejudice are identified. These might include the part played by fear and ignorance in perpetuating stigmatised stereotypes, or the experiences of shame common to those whose 'differences' are viewed as undesirable.

Access to a range of contemporary, attention grabbing, accessible resources is another feature of our teaching. We believe that active engagement is important. One of the

understandings we wish learners to develop is that some 'differences' impact on one's life chances in undesirable ways. To illustrate our point we use a short research task based around Department for Education (DfE) statistics on school exclusion rates (2014) and attainment by pupil characteristics (2015) to raise awareness of important educational inequalities. Although learners are aware of the poor education and employment outcomes experienced by disabled people, they are invariably surprised by the trends they find in relation to ethnicity, gender, free school meals and special educational need – and the all-pervasive nature of this impact. They learn that pupils with special educational needs are eight times more likely to be excluded from school than other pupils; students of Gypsy/Roma and Traveller heritage experience the highest rates of exclusion; and boys, in particular Black Caribbean boys, experience high levels of exclusion and low levels of educational attainment. This often opens up discussions regarding intersectionality, an important concept in relation to inequality. We want learners to understand that the relationships between gender, ethnicity and social class are complex (Arnot et al., 1999) and, as noted by Choudry, official statistics reveal very little about individuals who *'live at the intersections of several different kinds of inequality'* (2014:11).

Short video clips, academic commentaries and newspaper articles are used to expose learners to a range of perspectives relating to factors what contribute to inequalities and the strategies used by schools, colleges and local authorities to address them. We use a variety of theoretical models to support learners' critical evaluative skills and we specifically use Minow's 'dilemma of difference' as an analytic tool. Her 'dilemma' centres on whether social justice is best achieved through different or equal treatment. She asks:

*When does treating people differently emphasise their differences and stigmatize or hinder them on that basis?*

*And when does treating people the same become insensitive to their difference and likely to stigmatise or hinder them on that basis? (Minow, 1990: 20)*

Bhopal's (2011) research on the practices and attitudes towards Gypsy and Traveller pupils identifies examples of inclusive practice based on special treatment: flexibility with regard to attendance and school arrival time; allowing siblings to stay together or to visit each other's classrooms during their first week at a new school; and lending school resources such as books and laptops to assist with the completion of homework. These practices were aimed at overcoming some of the barriers to inclusion resulting from the different cultural and material realities of Gypsy and Traveller pupils. Bhopal found that

'special' treatment emphasised the difference and outsider status of these pupils and contributed to the negative attitudes of some teachers who viewed this support as unnecessary favouritism. In this way, these accommodations served to further stigmatise these pupils and worked against the school's inclusive intent – yet without such special treatment, some Gypsy and Traveller pupils would have remained alienated from school. Examples like this can help learners understand that both equal treatment and special treatment present difficult challenges.

Another aspect of helping learners to develop a greater understanding of diversity and diverse groups within society and the education system is explored by asking the learners to consider contemporary gang culture. We focus on the impact knife and gun crime can have on: victims, perpetrators, family members, and agencies working within this field. The session starts by asking the learners to discuss what the term community means. Our purpose at this point is to explore what kind of communities the learners belong to, what being in a community means for them, drawing on both their personal experiences and a range of literature (Neill 1960, Beare 2001). To complement this exercise we show a video clip produced by the UK Youth Parliament (Project Consider: 2006). This very powerful film shows young people who have been 'caught up' in a weapons based culture. After the video we ask the learners to work in small groups to reflect on the content and discuss issues raised as this emotive topic would be difficult to discuss in a larger group. We start the dialogue by asking our learners to share their emotions, responses and personal views of gang related culture. During this exercise we work with each group to help them articulate their responses; question any assumptions; consider why young people might become involved in gangs; and what the impact of being in a gang might have on the individual, family members and the wider community. We then ask the groups to share their reflections with the wider group. During this part of the session we have observed learners gently challenge each other's assumptions and move away from easy stereotypes to a more considered understanding of these complex issues.

One of our learning objectives is to support learners to develop deeper, more informed understandings of social justice and inclusion. Using Archer et al.'s (2010) and MacDonald and Marsh's (2005) work on urban environments we explore the complexities of gang culture and the links between social and educational exclusion. Using these active learning techniques we provide learners with the opportunity to reflect on a different aspect of diversity. This aligns with Garcia and Van Soest's (2000) suggestion that in order to adequately prepare learners to enter the workplace and indeed society as a whole, they must engage in demanding learning experiences.

## Concluding reflections

The experience of considering what we teach, and why, has enabled us to recognise that one of our primary aims is to use our collective experiences and an inclusive pedagogy to prepare learners to become '*multiculturally competent professionals*' (Garcia and Van Soest 2014:21). In an ever changing society this is essential for our learners and members of society whose lives they may touch during their professional careers. Learners need to be able to explore things from different perspectives and in doing so make the links between diversity, inclusion and social justice.

In this paper we have highlighted some of the specific teaching strategies we have found useful in supporting these aims. These include drawing on learners' first-hand experiences as a way of helping them make meaningful connections to the broader issues; exposing them to a range of perspectives and resources to support deeper, holistic understandings and developing critical evaluative skills; engaging them in activities and dialogue which challenge and might feel uncomfortable at times.

These processes require a particular sort of classroom environment and a particular sort of relationship with, and between, our learners. We believe that an accepting and non-judgmental classroom atmosphere based on mutual trust and respect is essential. This helps create the emotionally safe and secure environment that is needed to have genuine debates about difficult topics and to enable learners to identify and challenge normative ways of thinking (Sousa 1998, Stipek 2006).

Like the HE tutors interviewed in Hick et al.'s (2011) research on teacher educators' understandings and practices in relation to diversity, we are aware of the cultural homogeneity of staff and learners on our programme. Our White middle class status makes us question the appropriateness of our delivery of aspects of the module and we sometimes feel unsure about the best way to engage learners in discussions about equality and diversity. We are clear in our own beliefs with regard to diversity and inclusion, in that all our learners heritage, views, opinions and contributions are equally valued by us. We are also aware that there are no nice neat solutions to the complex issues we address within the module. Nevertheless, it is through the processes such as those described in this paper that we believe small yet important steps are taken. We will know we have moved towards a more inclusive society, when headlines such as those noted at the beginning of this paper, are less common. In the meantime, it is important that the dialogue continues.

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