A culturally responsive approach

Estimated time: 10 minutes

Having explored approaches to incorporating both pupil voice and place into the curriculum design and implementation process, we will now delve into how you can do this in a meaningful way.

In the article below, Aminul Hoque explores the importance of a culturally responsive approach. Developed by Ladson-Billings (1995, p. 467), the term 'culturally responsive pedagogy' carefully considers the kinds of knowledge and lived experiences of students, families and their communities as a means of making meaningful changes to classrooms and curricula.

Leading inclusive schools: A culturally responsive pedagogy

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As a teaching philosophy, a culturally responsive pedagogy is premised on the idea that valuing culture is central to learning. Educators cannot trivialise or pay token attention to the cultural world and lived experiences of their pupils, and instead should take time to understand their pupils and their sociocultural worlds, and listen to them as well as valuing and recognising their cultural identities, histories and heritage within pedagogical practices inside the educational institution. This is especially the case for Black and minority ethnic (BAME) pupils who come from disadvantaged, low socio-economic backgrounds and whose identities and voices are often silenced, misrepresented or ignored, with many feeling 'invisible' within schooling spaces (Hoque, 2015, 2018). Some key questions underpin a culturally responsive pedagogy:

- Do teachers really know who their pupils are?
- Should they care?
- Are teachers aware of the wider social, community and cultural realities through which many of their pupils are living?
- How do we blur the line between the school and the local community?
- Why is it important that our curriculum is relevant to the lives of our pupils, reflecting their social worlds?
- How do we get to know our students?
- What practical and realistic strategies can teachers adopt to help to ensure that pupil identity, lived experience and culture is embedded within the curriculum?

Developed by Ladson-Billings (1995, p. 467), the term 'culturally responsive pedagogy' taps into various kinds of knowledge and lived experiences of pupils as a means of making classrooms and curricula more inclusive, and refers to a 'dynamic or synergistic relationship between home/community culture and school culture'.

Funds of 'knowledge' and 'identity'

An important study that enhances our understanding of the educative and ethical value of a culturally responsive pedagogy is the in-depth ethnography of working class Mexican communities from Tucson, Arizona by Moll et al. (1992). Moll et al. and others (Cun, 2020; Volman and Gilde, 2020) developed the idea of 'funds of knowledge' for teachers as a way of connecting the homes and cultures of their pupils with the classrooms. Moll et al. (1992) note that what becomes clear is that there is a disconnect between household arrangements ('funds of knowledge') and classroom practices. The study found that, often, teachers were isolated from the everyday lived experiences, social worlds and resources of their pupils and were not even aware of the variety of funds of knowledge that their pupils had – focused around ranching and farming, labour laws, accounting and budgets, caring responsibilities, appliance and automobile repairs, carpentry and first aid, and so on – and thus did not draw upon them within the classroom. Once the 'funds of knowledge' of pupils (such as those cited above) are identified and acknowledged, they allow for meaningful and educative classroom practices to take shape.

Scholars such as Volman and Gilde (2020) argue that it is not always possible for educators to gain insight into the 'funds of knowledge' of their pupils' home and family culture, as home visits are both difficult to conduct and very time-consuming for teachers. Therefore, educators should also draw upon the multiple funds of culture and 'identity' that are meaningful to their pupils, such as family, community, language, faith structures, etc.

Recent research – 'faith' as an important fund of knowledge and identity

One key feature and extension of the funds of knowledge and identity discussed above is the importance of religion and 'faith' for many young people attending schools. Several UK-based (Hoque, 2015, 2018; Iqbal, 2019) and global studies (Guo, 2015; Hickey-Moody and Horn, 2022; Merry, 2005) suggest that religious diversity is an important part of

a culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy, and should be a core component of a multicultural and social justice education framework. Religious literacy can be challenging, but young people need to respect each other, and learn to live with difference and peacefully with people who have different belief systems from themselves. I now turn to my own study (Hoque, 2018) of the lives, multifaceted identities and educational experiences of a group of young Bangladeshi Muslim pupils aged 15 to 19 from East London, in illustrating further why a culturally responsive pedagogy is necessary, particularly when a large cohort of the pupil population feel victimised, alienated, marginalised, voiceless and invisible.

Through group and one-to-one interviews, my in-depth ethnographic research (Hoque, 2015; 2018) reveals that the 'knotty' concept of identity is important to these young people, as they are continually negotiating meanings of what it means to be British-born, Bangladeshi and Muslim within a wider lived experience of Islamophobia (see Allen, 2010). Furthermore, two aspects of their multifaceted identity – the mother tongue and the significance of the hijab – posed important and problematic questions for educational spaces. The young people felt a sense of tension and conflict between their faith, language, cultural identities and schooling experiences. For example, one of the participants – Tarik – spoke of being discouraged by his teacher to take up Bengali as a GCSE subject (even though it was important for him to read and write in his mother tongue) and opt instead for a modern foreign language, as it would 'open up doors' for him (Hoque, 2018, p. 187).

Many of the female participants also spoke about the importance of the hijab (headscarf), as it provided a sense of comfort and felt natural (Ayesha) and, for Serena, the hijab was core to maintaining a sense of 'modesty, respect, safety and community' (Hoque, 2018, p. 190). This is in line with wider research that suggests that the hijab is a core component of Muslim female identity (Bullock, 2007; Siraj, 2011; Hoque, 2015). And yet there was much tension between this personal faith-based identity and the secular space of the school for many of the participants. Ayesha recalled an incident where she felt 'victimised' when one of her teachers publicly called her out in the playground after the terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015. Serena also spoke about her non-Muslim friend being 'concerned' about her after she decided to wear the headscarf, in relation to whether it was 'forced' upon her by her father. This further gained momentum in a classroom discussion, where Serena felt that her teacher was also siding with her friend as she was 'concerned and worried' about Serena's desire to wear the hijab. In a separate incident, Serena was reminded by the careers adviser that 'she may need to think twice about certain careers because of her choice of clothing' (Hoque, 2018, pp. 191–192).

These narratives are consistent with other European studies that demonstrate a common practice of monolingualism and the exclusion of the mother tongue from the culture of mainstream schooling (Agirdag, 2010; Kenner and Hickey, 2008), and where Muslim practices and beliefs are often misunderstood by teachers and fellow pupils (Shain, 2003, 2011; Sian, 2015; Taylor et al., 2013). Such experiences present both a challenge and an opportunity for educational spaces. I argue that:

> 'the challenge here for educators is to reflect upon their own prejudices, bias and pedagogic practices and develop a better understanding of the alienating workings of Islamophobia. The opportunity is to offer an educational model that listens to the life stories and understands the everyday social worlds of their pupils and incorporates these complex areas of identity within the curriculum. This makes education relevant, rewarding, interesting and meaningful.' (Hoque, 2018, pp. 191–192)

The key conclusion of my study suggests that embracing a culturally responsive model of education and exploring the cultural, linguistic, ethnic and religious identities of pupils within the curriculum – however difficult and ethically challenging it may be – can be meaningful and educational for both teachers and pupils.

Strategies to include faith, culture and identity in the educational curriculum

Underpinned by a dual process of continuous teacher education and training and innovative leadership that allows their teaching staff to be creative and student-centred, this section explores three potential approaches that will empower teachers to develop a culturally responsive model of education based on the lived experiences of their pupils.

1. Adopting an additive and positive view of pupils

Teacher educator Macias (2021) propagates that teachers need to adopt a positive view of their pupils, especially when working with disadvantaged pupils of BAME backgrounds. 'Instead of erasing students' lived experiences', this approach 'moves away from a deficit view of students who have challenging life experiences (only focusing on what students lack), and instead towards an additive view of students who bring historically undervalued, but still valid skills and knowledge to classroom learning' (Macias, 2021, p. 14).

2. **Decolonising the curriculum**

The vast majority of educational spaces reflect, reproduce and transmit the knowledge and values of the wider mainstream dominant culture. 'Decolonising' the curriculum seeks ways in which to challenge this normativity. As a concept, 'decolonising' refers to a process of foregrounding students' social and cultural backgrounds within the curriculum, while also critiquing the dominant knowledge that shapes mainstream educational contexts (Hickey-

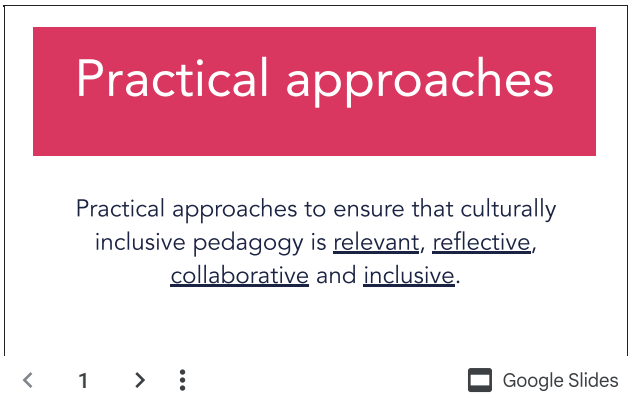
Moody and Horn, 2022). Therefore, teachers need to develop curriculum content that reflects the diversity of children that they teach. Put simply, pupils need to see themselves and their cultural worlds reflected, valued and represented in the books that they read and the history that they are taught – this creates an inclusive culture within the classroom.

3. A critical and reflexive approach to education

Educators must also be wary of bringing their own opinions, values and judgements and of exercising 'power' into often difficult and sensitive areas of discussion (Hickey-Moody and Horn, 2022; see also Flensner, 2020). The role of the teacher as a trusted facilitator, mentor and confidante is key. Many scholars such as Ladson-Billings (2001) and Vaas (2018) have suggested that teachers need to become hyper-reflexive and should teach with a sociopolitical consciousness, where self-teaching and understanding of the larger 'school-community-nation-world' (Ladson-Billings, 2001, pp. 120–121) is important. Teachers can be agents for change.

Some practical suggestions

In recent work for the National Education Union, UK (Hoque, 2020), I have outlined some practical approaches for teachers to ponder upon in ensuring a culturally responsive pedagogy that is relevant, reflective, collaborative and inclusive.



Conclusion

This article concludes with the assertion that teachers should become genuine researchers and take an interest in trying to understand the life-worlds of their pupils. A key message of this article is that teachers cannot teach children effectively if they lack an understanding of their pupils' cultures and lives. As Moll et al. (1992, p. 139) note, teachers need to assume the role of the 'learner' and not take a 'business'-like approach to families/cultures. Instead, they should approach with a non-judgemental, flexible and open mind, willing to learn and establish a 'symmetrical relationship' with the cultural worlds of their pupils based upon reciprocity and respect. This then has the potential to blur the rigid distinction between the school and the community, and to make the experience of education more equitable and inclusive.

The overall conclusion of this article is hardly revolutionary – we know that pupils perform better academically if value and importance are attributed to issues that matter in their lives. The idea of an inclusive curriculum governed by a pedagogy of collaboration, democracy, dialogue, care and humanity has been championed historically by many prominent educationalists, such as Paulo Freire (1996) and John Dewey (2008). At the core of such a philosophy lies the realisation that pupils do not leave their sociocultural worlds behind once they enter the school gates – and nor should they, as the Bullock Report asserted back in 1975.

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