

Reading 'diversity'

Implications for early childhood professionals

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This article aims to share some complex ideas and give useful insight into the field of social inclusion and diversity in employment in early childhood education. Diversity can be seen as a positive, providing employing institutions with a range of potential. Diversity can also be regarded as another word for difference, which implies marginalisation. In examining these two discourses the article focuses on those who work in bureaucracies and administration, and on those employed in early childhood education and care and in the training sector. Information about employees' religions, races, home and heritage languages, social classes, abilities and sexual preferences is commonly viewed as private. However, it could be argued that ignoring diversity leads to continued dominance by majorities and further silencing of the marginalised.

Unfortunately, the positive potential of diversity in early childhood education is often lost through assimilation and cultural normalisation. However, some countries are taking steps to retain it. In Norway, for example, there is increasing emphasis on recruiting diversity, including minority groups, to the early childhood professions. Nevertheless, simply putting minorities into a workplace will not be enough to change entrenched practices. The question of who (which gender, language, ethnic group and religion?) to employ in early childhood education is becoming a crucial one. We currently have little information about differences in pay and which groups have the greater voice in decision making. In addition, we have little data on the diversity of the individuals who work with children, those in higher education, those in policy making, or the parents.

Different views of diversity

There are many different definitions of diversity. The following section presents those of five different authors.

Acknowledging difference: benign variation or conflict and struggle?

Mohanty (1990) warns that: "The central issues... is not one of merely acknowledging difference; rather, the more difficult question concerns the kind of difference that is acknowledged and engaged. Difference seen as a benign variation (diversity)... rather than as conflict, struggle, or the threat of disruption, bypasses power as well as history to suggest a harmonious, empty pluralism" (p. 181).

Mohanty is saying that diversity must remain as a conflict, a struggle with threats of disruption. This is not what happens when diversity is supposedly happy harmony. She advocates the creation of discourses of difference, not just the acceptance of them. One way to achieve this could be through training institutions for early childhood education and care setting up centres of multicultural excellence. The problem is that managers and administrators might have other priorities. In addition, they tend to 'manage diversity' by recruiting diverse people and introducing different curriculum units while engaging in teaching as usual. This, she says, "is not shifting the normative culture versus subcultures paradigm."

Culturally sensitive learning environments

Bernhard (2001), in a review of Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke (1998), takes a different approach: "[This book] has as its goal the promotion of respect for diversity... There are diverse pathways

to development... A rating scale on diversity goes beyond respecting others, to active anti-bias efforts at including minority people in the programme” (p. 117). She goes on to say that “[w]hile it is useful to appeal to educators’ moral sense in respecting differences, it is equally important that people generally understand the diversity of human living in the various cultures, through first hand information, particularly about diverse ways to learning” (p. 118).

Bernhard appears to be an author positioned very differently from Mohanty regarding diversity. She seems to see ‘information’ as what matters, and does not acknowledge that all information is discursively constructed. For Bernhard, diversity appears to imply what Mohanty describes and then critiques as ‘harmony’ and ‘individualism.’ The diverse ways to learning that she writes about contrast with Mohanty’s views. From the perspective of developmental psychology espoused by Bernhard, diversity is seen as a discourse of ‘individual differences.’ But the perspective of liberal humanism is at odds with one which acknowledges other kinds of difference such as race or minority religion or language.

Problems of terminology in relation to capitalism

Some radicals in education (e.g., McLaren and Farahmandpur 2001) do not mention diversity at all, perhaps because of the problems associated with its definition. “Educational policies grounded on the ideology of economic rationalism engineer a view of democratic schooling as premised upon the harmonization of differences among ethnic groups and social classes, thereby mistaking the phenomenon needing explanation for the explanation itself. Racism is a symptom of capitalist exploitation, not the cause of social affliction. Hence teachers are deflected from examining the interrelationship among race, class and gender oppression within the context of global capitalist relations” (p. 363).

They seem to be saying that, despite the fact that teachers see before them children from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds, they do not always acknowledge the impact of racism stemming from capitalism. In adopting ‘multicultural’ approaches to diversity, therefore, they work on the basis of assuming a harmonious pedagogical practice which denies the influence of race, class and gender.

Managing diversity for effective outcomes

Le Roux (2001) presents a very conservative view of diversity. He claims that reason supports his version of ‘culturally responsive or culturally reflective education’ as “the most effective educational strategy or approach to address the educational needs of a culturally diverse classroom population successfully” (p. 49). He appears to view diversity in the simple terms of a culturally diverse classroom, although he says: “an accommodative, appreciative and responsive approach to the reality of cultural diversity is of the utmost importance.”

Capturing complexity

Beck (2001) appears to consider diversity as a variable that should be researched, captured and then managed. Beck discusses “education issues in a diverse society” (p. 299) but the focus is not on who might comprise the diversity and why, but on the functionality of a descriptor and the ‘offering’ of research data. Beck gives the example of a teacher–researcher who apprenticed her African-American students into the practices of formal literary scholarship. This “illustrates how Vygotsky’s distinction between spontaneous concepts and scientific concepts... can illuminate ways of helping students from a non-mainstream cultural background to develop the academic skills that they need to succeed in schools” (p. 300). There is no mention of cultural capital, class differences, or the historical construction of race affecting African Americans. However, Vygotsky’s writings (1962, in Rhedding-Jones 2005a, p. 156–162) are dated and have been translated into English, and it should be remembered that concepts and words may be misleading.

Implications and conclusions

Diversity is a term that should not be used lightly. It is a loaded concept with many complexities and innuendos. The views presented above are very different and there are other ways to conceptualise ideas about diversity. The important point is to take a critical perspective, to explore implications and to challenge relationships between concepts and approaches.

Fieldwork in India prompted Viruru (2002) to say: “the concept of the ‘Relation’ sees the Other as equal, and as a presence that is necessary because



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it is different... Another important aspect of the concept of Relation is that it is opposed to the idea of 'essence'... To exist in Relation, is to be part of an ever-changing and diversifying process, whereas to be reduced to an essence is to be fixed with permanent attributes" (p. 37).

Here, diversity is not defined as categories, as visible results of race and what we wear. Viruru's diversity is an 'ever-changing and diversifying process' that exists because of our relations with other people, other discourses and other positions. In the same vein, regarding research and our work as readers, Gallop (2000) tells us: "Genuine openness to diversity needs more than diversely representative authors. As much as who we read – even more, I would say – it matters how we read... If we do not pay close attention to what we read, our reading for diversity will only end up projecting... stereotypes" (p. 15).

The same applies to the reading and writing of field notes for research projects. It is not enough to say who is differently bodied. What matters is how we read the events and the sites of institutionalised practice in relation to our own concept of diversity, and that includes our own selves. We have to question diversity and be open to changing our own previously held ideas. It is only when we keep to an agenda of social justice that the effects of ethnic, linguistic, religious and racial diversity become ethical.

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