

0504

Everyday meanings of diversity in a multi-ethnic school.

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Background

Political discourses on Britain's multi-cultural society and their relationship to social cohesion have raised concerns about the impact of new waves of migrants to England as well as legacies of established immigrant communities on notions of British national identity. The sensitive nature of this topic has left primary schools with large influxes of children whose parents are recent migrants to England, without explicit guidance on managing diversity as strategic education policy makers are reluctant to lead new thinking about diversity. This paper will reflect on the thinking behind research plans to explore how one urban multi-ethnic school, responds to the arrival of children whose parents are migrant workers in a multi-ethnic town.

Research Questions

The aim of the research is to explore if a multi-ethnic school environment shapes everyday meanings of diversity and if day to day interactions with children from diverse ethnic backgrounds challenges or upholds whole school ideas on diversity.

Methods

Insights into everyday life in a multi-ethnic school will be facilitated through qualitative research methods and ethnographic approaches for collecting data. Initially, whole school policies and mission statements will be analysed for words or phrases which exemplify the school's educational philosophy on multi-cultural education or its position on diversity. Then, in the tradition of an ethnic study, observations will be made of different settings in the school. Individual and group interviews and photographs of the environment will gather data on the views of adults (a governor, a member of senior management team, two class teachers, a PSHE and/or Citizenship Co-ordinator, two Teaching Assistants and two parents) familiar with the school environment and with different levels of involvement in everyday school matters. In addition to this, questionnaires will be disseminated to gather further information from participants.

Frame

The above approach will create opportunities to compare ideas as expressed in whole school policies with practice in terms of how aspects of the school environment promote or challenge policy statements. The paper will consider methodological and ethical issues associated with applying ethnographic approaches to a study of a sensitive contemporary topic. In exploring possible differences between policy ideals, how they relate to a potentially sensitive topic and if daily experiences reinforce or challenge expressed thoughts on diversity, it is important participants feel they can be open about their thoughts. The paper will consider issues related to selecting methods in which participants feel they can talk about realities of being a multi-ethnic setting as they see it as opposed to how the school would like participants to view its response to diversity. It will discuss approaches which it is hoped will encourage participants to engage with a sensitive topic and reflect on environmental factors which inform their views on it.

Research findings

It is hoped the paper will introduce themes and issues to be considered when researching how members of a school community make sense of relationships between meanings of policy statements and real experiences of diversity when through focussing on a school environment, there is

the potential to highlight sensitive topics. It will consider how openness can be encouraged when dealing with individuals with potentially different positions their willingness to discuss ideas which draw attention to their thoughts on contentious topics.