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Introduction

The link between obtaining a higher education degree and graduate level employability has received much attention amongst higher education institutions and policy makers (see for example, Robbins, 1963, Dearing, 1996, Yorke, 2006). The focus on employability has resulted in many institutions providing volunteering and placement opportunities, alongside the crucial involvement of employers' support (HEA, online) of such activity. Such work and a specific focus on the development of transferable graduate level skills is intended to produce graduates capable of entering a graduate employment market on successful completion of their course. Whilst this focus aligns closely with principles of human capital (Becker 1975) and many are critical of it (see Atkins, 1999; Morley, 2001), employability is now firmly embedded within higher education courses.

Little and Harvey, (2006) explored undergraduate students' perceptions of learning from work placements and whether or how students were able to build on that learning in subsequent stages of their degree course, but there has been insufficient attention paid to the benefits of higher education students' involvement with placements that are based on principles of intervention and social justice.

The HE participation and attainment rates of marginalised groups have been identified as problematic (DfE, 2014). Despite numerous interventions to support the educational experiences of non-traditional groups (see, for example, Byrom 2009), there is limited evidence to demonstrate how targeted interventions can support BME communities in particular.

This study explored the experiences of higher education students undertaking a placement in an educational setting that supported BME pupils. Utilising a Bourdieuan approach it focused specifically on how higher education students engaged in their placement as part of their HE course and how they supported BME pupils to enhance their engagement with education. In exploring this area, the following research question was developed: To what extent can higher education students contribute to an intervention programme that seeks to support BME pupils in their education?

Research Methodology

Students undertaking education-related undergraduate course at our post 1992 University, based in the East Midlands, are required to complete a placement during the second year of their course for a minimum of 30 days. Students self-select their placement; a number of students identified a charity they wished to undertake their placement with. The charity, based in the East Midlands is a small charity that provides targeted intervention programmes to support Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) young people with an education and health related

focus. Its ambition is to develop the confidence and competence in education practices of the target population, and to aid the development of better understandings of different cultural communities, by encouraging HE students to volunteer at their interventions and act as role models and mentors for the BME young people.

The intervention takes the form of Saturday and Sunday schools, which incorporates classroom-based activities in English, mathematics and science; and sporting activities. The sessions are delivered on a voluntary basis by qualified teachers. Students are encouraged to take their homework from school to the sessions, but are also provided with input to support them in these areas of the curriculum. The age range of students attending the intervention are across the primary and secondary age groups (from 5-16). There are, on average, approximately 60 children from a wide range of BME backgrounds in attendance at the sessions. The charity actively recruits higher education students to support their work, and is particularly keen to accept undergraduates studying an education-related undergraduate course.

The project, in line with other projects involving marginalised groups utilised a qualitative methodological approach, recognising the locus of control within power relationships. Using focus groups, discussions were undertaken with a range of research participants, including BME pupils, higher education students, parents of BME pupils and teachers involved in supporting BME pupils which elicited a range of information which we then analysed thematically. All research participants were fully briefed by the research team on the topic, purpose and focus of the research; and asked to complete an ethical consent form. The project was designed based on the ethical guidelines of BERA (2011) and our University code of practice. The identity of all participants has been anonymised, and information regarding withdrawal from the project was fully explained.

Findings and Conclusions

HE students identified a sense of 'giving back', stating that they were able to share their experiences of education with the BME pupils and recognising the contribution of education to their personal achievement in relation to undertaking a HE course. Interestingly, many of the HE students had decided to continue to volunteer at the placement, offering one-to-one support, and small group support for the BME pupils beyond the requirements of the HE course, demonstrating recognition of social responsibility, and social justice. Additionally, HE students found that the intervention somehow provided a space for them to 'fill a gap' for BME pupils in terms of opportunities to talk about HE courses, pathways, application process, and challenges; and this was supported through the discussions with the BME pupils who identified the value of having the HE volunteers in their classroom and their 'relatability' which they linked to their own career ambitions.

It can be concluded that placement activity which is incorporated into higher education courses as part of a drive to support students in developing and acquiring the necessary graduate attributes attractive to employers has a reach beyond an economic one. For the HE students involved in this small scale study the evidence demonstrates there are opportunities for them to develop a strong insight and understanding of social justice, and social responsibility. Additionally, the utilisation of HE students into such interventions can have a positive influence on BME pupils who may be thinking of applying for HE courses, or indeed, before their participation with the scheme would not have considered HE as an option for them.

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