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Reflections on research and practice in Equality and Diversity

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

This paper reflects on the experiences of two researchers working in the area of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. The work that they do involves a number of national and international projects which link research with best practice to influence policy. This includes work for the British Council and Advance HE on rolling out the Athena SWAN scheme in India, Brazil and Indonesia, research on social mobility via employability and addressing the BAME degree attainment gap, and the impact of coaching on higher education. Using their lived experience and the feedback from their engagement with these projects, the researchers identify that while objectives behind each project are different, some key similar issues emerge from all the work. This includes the collection and interpretation of data, and ensuring that the voices of all relevant stakeholders are involved. The paper relates these findings to key literature.

Full paper

This paper reflects on the experiences of two white female researchers working in the area of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. This involves a number of national/international projects which link research with best practice to influence policy. This includes assignments for the British Council and Advance HE on supporting the Athena SWAN scheme in India, Brazil and Indonesia, research on social mobility via employability and addressing the BAME degree

attainment gap. Using their lived experience and the feedback from their engagement with these projects, the researchers identify that, while objectives behind each project are different, some key similar issues emerge. This includes the collection and interpretation of data, management of power dynamics and assurance that the voices of all stakeholders are heard.

Theoretical context

Healy et al (2019), suggest that the context is important in the understanding of inequalities (p.5), advocating that “the variability of the visibility and legitimacy of inequalities is relative to the vantage point in the sectoral actors.” (p.6) They emphasise the need “to capture the interweaving of gender, race, class and other axes without prioritising one over the other” (p.7), avoiding “binary analysis” (p.9), and encouraging “empirical flexibility (p.10).

Reflecting on this, the authors have used a dialogic methodology for this paper. Building on the work of Nolan and Flynn (2021), they have sought “to engage in critical reflexivity” and to construct a process whereby “theoretical and narrative [strands] weave together to illustrate how the lived experience, conversations, creating a sense of belonging and understanding for all learners can bring a richness and depth to the research journey” (p.1). We are very conscious that, like Nolan and Flynn, “As White people in academia, we benefit from the privilege of normative identity – our position is the default, which allows us the comfort and security of being the norm. To research the topic of inclusion we must listen to and prioritise experiences which are beyond our own.” (p.2).

Reflection on our context

A key thread that runs through all the authors’ diversity and inclusion work is the issue of power and how we challenge the traditional hierarchical structures. To address this, it is vital to move away from the concept of ‘experts’ and ‘recipients of knowledge’ and to create learning and research spaces that are collaborative. In their work around decolonising the curriculum, the authors talk about ‘flattening the traditional power/knowledge nexus (Bartlett et al 2021) and this ideal is embedded in Palmer’s description of teaching as a ‘daily exercise in vulnerability’ (1997). It is helpful to

step back from historical models of the 'academic', often centred around being 'right', powerful, and unchallenged. The concept of 'knowledge is power' immediately puts learners in an inferior position. This can result in a learning experience that is reflective of the characteristics of the teacher, which is problematic in the context of diverse learners. Levelling the power dynamic by encouraging learners to inform the learning environment is an important step towards more inclusive curricula and reduced attainment gaps. The impact of differences in lived experiences between teacher and learner on attainment is articulated in our work on tackling academic bias (Rana et al., 2022).

The view of researchers as 'experts' permits them to comment on the lives of other people instead of privileging the intended benefactors of research who are 'experts by experience'. In international gender equality work it is very easy for us to provide solutions or guidance that would work in the UK. The skill in this work is in taking time to understand the local context and working with collaborators to create appropriate actions.

There are difficulties in articulating this shift in mindset; teachers and researchers are often keen to create more inclusive practices but are looking for guidance. An ideal approach would be to support academics in receiving 'lived' knowledge, and to support students and the benefactors of research in sharing it.

Key findings

Our findings reproduce the literature in their discovery that context is key and that one dimension of diversity and inclusion is not enough. Intersectionality is at the heart of diversity research. Case studies and lived experience are central to understanding the approaches to improve inclusivity. Crucially, the benefactors of the curricula or research should be involved in its design. Too often finding the right quantitative data can be difficult, but seeking diverse voices can supersede these barriers. In doing this our paper found that researching diversity is not to chart a deficit model, but to discover advantages for all.

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