The Challenges of Leadership and Diversity in Independent Schools

Introduction

Independent schools, in seeking to model and cater for their increasingly diverse student cohort, have an obligation to seek communities of practice which will support this objective.

This paper aims to explore and interrogate the tensions which arise when terms such as diversity, equality, gender and inclusion enter the organizational workplace vernacular. Encounters with 'inequality regimes' (Acker, 2006), and with '… loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender and racial inequalities within particular organisations' (ibid, p.443) are often experienced as part of everyday organisational practices.

In the US, there are differential social and economic experiences between Hispanic, African-American, Asian and White ethnicities. Typically, African Americans are disadvantaged with regard to employment, health, housing and education (Plaut, 2010). Here the largest racial minority group is Black (African- Caribbean, African or African American (12.6%), (Jonsen, Maznevski & Schneider, 2011). In contrast, the largest minority ethnic group in the UK is the South Asian population (5.9%). Context-sensitivity is necessary for all locations in which diversity management and research is conducted (Özbilgin, 2009). The broad spectrum of ethnically diverse communities, who live and work in the US, has prompted a corpus of scholarship which explores how workplace practices support or hinder minority ethnic groups as they traverse their career paths. Organisations are microcosms of societies within which they are embedded, and work cannot be understood outside the context of the socio-cultural arena in which it is enacted. Organisational dynamics often mirror societies' structures, beliefs and tensions, including less favourable outcomes for minority ethnic individuals and women in many Western societies. As such, ethnicity scholars are continuously urged to acknowledge the socially-constructed and contextual nature of ethnicity in organisations.

Segregation along racial, ethnicity and gender lines pervades all elements of society even in parliamentary representation. The political sphere does not model its own rhetoric around equality of opportunity and access - Black Minority Ethnic (BME)

members of parliament currently number only 27 out of 649 (4.2%). Of these, only eight are BME women – under a third of all BME Members of Parliament (MP's). While there is cause for guarded optimism in the business sector in regards to women in the most senior positions in the largest companies - in 2012, 15% of directorships of FTSE[i] 100 companies are held by women (Sealy et al, 2012), representing a 2.5% increase from a three-year plateau - however, when taking into account gender, nationality and ethnicity of FTSE 100 company directors, only 9.9% of female directors are from minority ethnic groups, and only one of these is a UK national. The pattern evident in business thus replicates the gender and ethnic profiles of leadership in politics, whereby career progression reflects ethnic and gender penalties.

Diversity and Teacher Education

Classroom teaching presents many diversity and inclusion challenges which many teachers feel ill equipped to deal with. *Teaching to Transgress, (*bell hooks, 1994) provides a useful framework to discuss the development of teachers who are able to engage with and understand diversity. The book explains why it is crucial that educators are given the opportunity to be reflective so that they are able to understand the relationship between achievement/under-achievement and social justice. Even though the book was written in 1994 the challenges and discussion could easily be transferred into a 2015 classroom. Hooks argues that

> 'Empowerment cannot happen if we as educators refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks. When teachers/trainers bring their own narratives of their experiences into classroom discussions it eliminates the possibility that we can function as all-knowing, silent interrogators…'

A case study of Woolmer University (Mayor et al, 2007) reported the development of an identity module that placed the emphasis on valuing individual identity of teachers and pupils within a multicultural setting; raising student teachers awareness of teaching in diverse contexts; and encouraging respect and equal treatment of pupils from diverse backgrounds. Creating a separate identity module allowed student teachers to reflect critically on their own cultural background and interrogate the biases of their own subject positions. The development of an identity module such as this enabled the students to be presented with a range of challenges, including comprehending the cultural backgrounds of minority ethnic communities, how they 'make meaning of the world' (Epstein and Kheimets 2000: 202), and the ways in which

they articulate their experiences of racism and interact with difference. Such challenges are needed, especially if students have never worked with a Black teacher, or worked in a school where there is a high percentage of minority students and very few White students.

Recent work by Beverly Daniel Tatum (2003) in the US provides students teachers with an understanding of the psychological causes and emotional reality of racism as it appears in everyday life. The course incorporates the use of lectures, readings, simulation exercises, group research projects and extensive class discussion to help students explore the psychological impact of racism on both the oppressor and the oppressed. The course (called Psychology of Racism) has been taught eighteen times at three different establishments, including a public university, a small state college and a private women's college. The feedback from students indicated that they were amazed by the way in which the course changed their thinking on the subject of racism.

Training Leaders

There are many scholars such as Acker (2006) who have noted that hierarchies are gendered, racialised and classed, especially when it comes to leadership in Europe and the US.

Leadership theory, however, has traditionally suppressed and neutralised 'difference', including gender and race/ethnic dimensions. Much of the data collected on early leadership research was gathered in business, military and government settings, from white, Anglo-Saxon men in leadership positions. Leadership publications have reflected this bias. A trawl through academic journals and educational management courses revealed that race equality was rarely a topic of interest even though ethnicity was known to play a role in career progression. Recent research suggests that the social identity group to which a leader belongs is considered a significant factor in leader effectiveness and the extent to which a leader may feel able to enact that identity (van Knippenberg, 2011). From a sociological perspective, this is explained by the extent to which the leader and the group see themselves as part of a collective or share the same social identity.

Educational leadership has suffered the same fate as its political and organizational counterparts. Osler (2006) points out that textbooks aimed at aspiring

school leaders published in the 1980s and 1990s in Britain rarely referred to equity, even though by then minority ethnic communities were well-established in this country. Educational leaders need to be aware of diversity issues and ways of encouraging ethnic minority achievement. It is no longer acceptable to rely on simply increasing the number of ethnic minority teachers, who - like any other teachers - may be good or bad role models. Some BME teachers may refuse to acknowledge their own identity and prefer to be assimilated into the dominant culture as the way to achieve success within the establishment (Showunmi and Constantine-Simms, 1995). In attempting to understand the needs of those leading ethnically diverse educational institutions, it is essential to ascertain what previous training and development they have encountered which has focused on equality issues in order to establish a platform from which their current needs can be met. It could be argued that the educational arena has progressed much in terms of equality, nevertheless the issue of BME under-achievement still exists, which would suggest that current types of development programmes do not meet all the requirements of educational leadership with many needs still to be addressed. Very little attention is given to issues of diversity and equality in the development of educational leaders. (Coleman 2011:11)

In addition to the professional development of teachers, all educational leaders need to acquire sufficient understanding of the diversity issues facing UK schools and skills in handling these issues.

Lumby with Coleman (2007: 142) states that there is increasing scrutiny of the part that leadership plays in relation to equality initiatives: 'Although leaders may not be alone in having power and access to resources within organisations, their power in terms of their formal role of authority and access to other sources of power mean that they have the capacity *and* possibility to unsettle power relations.' A number of arguments have been put forward for encompassing equality within leadership, including the idea that leaders may play a role in acknowledging and validating the experiences of disempowered groups or may provide support when staff experience a backlash against equality and diversity initiatives.

In much of the literature, as Bebbington (2009: 10) notes, there is a tension between the need for leadership to advance the equality agenda and the reluctance of some leaders to engage with this area.

Conclusion

In the context of the under-representation of BME staff in senior roles and the need for a larger number of BME applicants for headship, a recurring question which has been asked of state schools should perhaps be asked of Independent schools - Given the growth in international pupils studying at independent schools, how do school leaders intend to diversify their workforce? What diversity training is in place to ensure school leadership teams are able to reflect on the school workforce? And how can these aims be synthesized so that all who engage within these educational places of work reach their full potential?

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Definition of **FTSE** 100. The **Financial Times Stock Exchange** 100 share index; an average of share prices in the 100 largest, most actively traded companies on the London Stock Exchange.