



Increasing Musical Diversity and Inclusion in Early Childhood Settings

This piece has been written by Susan Young and Nicola Burke with MERYC-England and Tri-Borough Music Education Hub

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If we accept that racism is always operating, the question becomes not “Is racism taking place?” but rather “HOW is racism taking place in this specific context?” How does awareness of that change how we think about our actions and our work? (DiAngelo, 2019)

Background

A recent Tri-borough Music Hub project placed ten musicians to work with ten early childhood practitioners, each from a different setting. Six of the ten early childhood practitioners were from diverse ethnic backgrounds. In the majority of urban settings in the UK a multi-ethnic workforce representative of the local demographic is the norm. All but one of the visiting musicians, plus the mentors and project leader were from white British, middle class backgrounds. We noticed that the musicians overlooked the musical identity of the childhood practitioners they were paired with and did not explore the potentials of musical diversity.

⇒ The small research project we report here was motivated by that observation. We interviewed ethnically diverse early childhood practitioners from four settings in the West London, Tri-borough area.

Diversity and Inclusion

Each dimension of difference (race, religion, gender, [dis]ability, class) brings its own challenges and possible approaches to ensure inclusion. Unless aspects of difference are sufficiently separated, recommendations for action remain too general and have little leverage.

⇒ This study focused on racial diversity and how to increase inclusion in the workforce.

Defining Inclusion

The concept of inclusion has arisen from different sources and each imparts different meanings onto the concept.

- Inclusion in education has originated from the policy to include children with special educational needs into mainstream education.
- Inclusion in the workplace, developed through business and human resources strategies, refers mainly to diversity in racial, gender and religious terms and how to promote full participation among employees in organisations.

- The concept of social inclusion arose from the progressive politics of New Labour as a result of concerns about the lack of social mobility experienced by some disadvantaged groups.
 - The idea of musical inclusion has evolved from community music practice. It refers to the provision of varied musical genres and styles so that all children, irrespective of any difference, can both find and develop their own musical interests and identities.
- ⇒ In this study we adopt the concept of 'inclusion' to refer to the ability of a diverse workforce to participate fully in music projects.

Levels of inclusion:

- Access: Is the music work accessible to all those who are entitled, wish or deserve to take part?
- Participation: Are the activities and expectations presented in such a way that everyone can participate?
- Empowerment: Is everyone able to contribute something of their own heritage, ideas, imagination and skills? There is a risk, otherwise, that inclusion is something that is 'done' by the more dominant group to others. At this level of empowerment, a need for negotiation and dialogue arises. If everyone offers what is unique to them, the result may be so diverse that commonality and consensus is lost. So there is a balance to be struck between **uniqueness and consensus**.

Language Matters

In the interviews with practitioners we asked, 'how do you describe your ethnicity?' One said, 'I'm just me', and gave her name. Others, mostly the more recently arrived, described themselves specifically by their nation of birth, e.g. Kosovan, Serbian, Brazilian. Some who were second generation described themselves by hyphenated terms, for example, 'Bangladeshi-British' or simply as British.

These responses highlight the fact that there are several problems with bringing diverse ethnic groups together under one category. Arts Council England (ACE), for example, use the grouping Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME). The term BAME is contested by some because it ignores the fact that White British is a category. Children and people of colour is a term adopted in much writing from the US and has come to be used increasingly in the UK, but some individuals argue that this collective term smooths over differences that are important to them. Moreover, there are many white people from other countries, particularly recent arrivals from Eastern European countries, who may be experiencing racial discrimination but are not included in a term 'people of colour'.

- ⇒ The contentious issue of language and terminology can be resolved by simply asking, respectfully, 'how do you describe yourself?'

Whiteness and Niceness

From background reading two key concepts emerged: whiteness coupled with white privilege, and 'niceness'.

Whiteness

'If I cannot tell you what it means to be white, I cannot understand what it means not to be white. I will be unable to bear witness to, much less affirm, an alternate racial experience. I will lack the critical thinking and skills to navigate racial tensions in constructive ways. This creates a culture in which white people assume that niceness is the answer to racial inequality and people of colour are required to maintain white comfort in order to survive.' DiAngelo (Guardian, article, 16th Jan 2019)

Niceness

Fear of causing offence, fear of 'doing the wrong thing' can cause people to adopt a 'colour blind' approach in which they profess to overlook race, nationality or ethnicity as categories of division rather than acknowledge, value and work with these categories.

Because white people are largely unaware of how their race impacts on their daily lives, they believe that all that is required to overcome racism is to be nice. But this results in a passive approach that does nothing to change the status quo.

Early childhood music and 'context blindness'

Currently early childhood music education practice is 'context-blind' in that certain, uniform ways of working are assumed to be suitable in all settings, irrespective of the social class, ethnic or religious backgrounds of the practitioners, children and families participating in those settings. The models of practice are typically imported and do not emerge from the practitioners, children and families within a particular setting.

The absence of attention to early childhood music as socially and culturally defined practice tends to obscure the highly westernised, middle class practice that the typical early childhood music session embodies. It is dominated by certain songs, activities and ways of participating that promote a monocultural model of practice and reinforce 'white', middle class social and cultural values.

The use of music in early childhood education as an intervention for functional purposes currently dominates practice. Such a view emphasises the use of music for its beneficial impact on cognitive and social development. This emphasis has distracted attention away from the development of socially and culturally attuned approaches.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- ⇒ Actions to promote inclusion will always need to be tailored to specific groups and specific situations.
- ⇒ Here are recommendations that relate specifically to inclusion of a diverse workforce that will be applied in future Tri-borough Music Hub projects.

Access: How is access to the project being offered and decided among practitioners in a setting? Who is selected and on what criteria?

Participation: Are the activities presented in the project arising from the interests, identities and abilities of all those present? How can reinforcing racism be avoided in the content and activities?

Empowerment: Is everyone able to contribute from their knowledge, interests and abilities and is their contribution influencing the direction of the work that evolves from the group?

- 1 Instruct the musician to avoid adopting a dominant position in the conversation with their partner and to listen. Encourage the musician to enquire about the musical interests of their partner.
- 2 Invite project participants to bring examples of music which relate closely to their own musical identities and share these.
- 3 Invite course participants to recall any songs, clapping games from their childhood and to share these.
- 4 Encourage musician and setting practitioner to evolve an activity to share based NOT on the musician's practice alone, but which represents some kind of dialogue, a shared and evolved approach.

Inclusion is what we do

Inclusion begins with awareness, understanding and acknowledgement but to 'be' inclusive is a matter of practice, and it takes certain skills. Most inclusive behaviours are a result of emotional intelligence skills such as social perception, empathy, self-awareness and management of your own emotions. These are skills that need to be practised.

As a society there are intractable, deep-seated problems of racial differentiation that are not going to be easily solved by a bulleted list of quick-fix recommendations. But this is the place to start:

- Be always alert to covert racism & white privilege; notice it; do something
- Challenge stereotypes or bias when opportunities arise. Don't avoid it, and don't just be 'nice'
- Find out more about cultural diversity in exact locations and settings
- Reflect on the cultural background of children and families
- Model respect for diversity whenever opportunities arise
- Share your own culture with children and encourage others to share their culture
- Model good listening and find and show respectful ways to ask about differences
- Participate in training about diversity and inclusive practice
- Respond to children's questions about difference and build their understanding
- Extend everyone's awareness of diversity through songs, music, books artefacts, etc
- Notice diversity in the children's play and what they say e.g. dramatic play, stories, food, the arts.

Emotional Intelligence to Facilitate Change

- Recognise how your own positionality [gender, class, race, sexuality, religion, (dis)ability] informs your views and your relationships to others in the group
- Act with humility
- Understand the difference between opinion and informed knowledge
- Let go of anecdote and look for wider, social patterns
- Recognise your own defensiveness and use it constructively
- Accept discomfort as necessary for growth
- Keep focused on the implications for self (not for others). What does this mean for me? What do I need to do?
- Identify your learning edge. How can I push this further? How am I applying this in practice?