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# Concepts of Diversity in the UK: Person-centred Methodological Approaches to Tracking Identity Formation within Education

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## **Abstract**

*Many studies of diversity are concerned with groups identified externally by for example, ethnicity, gender or educational ability. The research reported in this paper aims to adopt person-centred approaches to explore how identity formation interacts with diversity in the context of education. A review of current conceptualisations of diversity in education research provides a background for bringing together substantive and methodological aims to investigate how young people aged 18-19 with different educational outcomes have been constructed as different from one another. The paper addresses how our proposed methods and methodology evolved from theoretical and pragmatic concerns in order to address our research questions.*

## **Introduction**

Generalisations which have underpinned social provision of education since the 1980s have resulted in many young people missing out (Blanden and Machin, 2007; Ainscow et al, 2007), suggesting that fairer social provision must be sensitive to their differences from one another as much as their commonality. The authors have been designing an empirical project that explores specific differences between young people to consider what import these findings have for social justice in the provision of schooling. In response to our recent theorising about young people's subjectivity and schooling we argue for a non-categorical approach to diversity research. We have been investigating how diversity related to education is currently mapped within policy, practice and research literature. Many existing studies of diversity are concerned with groups identified externally by for example, ethnicity, gender or educational ability. We also examined what methods have been used to explore the topic of diversity from an educational perspective, finding that these studies have largely used methods that reproduced and re-inscribed existing categories of diversity, particularly large scale longitudinal studies (e.g. Longitudinal Study of Young People in England and Wales 2004-2005). However, we have found a small but discernible development in research methods towards congruence between concepts of diversity and the methodologies employed. In this paper, we explore the interface between substantive research on diversity and research methods that have some resonance with the content of the research. First, we identify, discuss and critically evaluate some exemplar methodologies, showing their strengths and limitations for diversity research. Second, we outline some theoretical justifications for the further development of person-centred methods suggesting that they allow for greater complexity and nuanced understandings of diversity. Then finally, we describe our own development of a person-centred

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empirical research project, showing how our investigations into theory and method have shaped methodology.

### **Categorisation**

Many studies on diversity in education adopt pre-determined categories of diversity in their research designs, development of instruments and analytical frameworks (see also Boyask et al, forthcoming). Ainscow et al's (2007) survey of research on the 'diversity' of the English primary school population argues that differences between children are constructed rather than simply described, and that currently official statistics and policy texts dominate the way in which diversity is constructed in terms of simplistic, mono-conceptual and evaluative categories. Moreover, there are tensions about how helpful categorisation is without dialogue between policy makers and practitioners. While sophisticated statistical techniques may yield different interpretations of trends in deprivation, they fail to offer explanatory detail which would help teachers to adjust practice (Allen and Vignoles, 2007). On the one hand, categories acknowledge that diversity is composed of many elements with possibly distinctive needs; but since most literature focuses on one or two categories, it fails to account for the fact that multiple aspects of diverse identity may coexist within the individual. While there is a growing body of literature that theorises the intersecting nature of categories of diversity (e.g. Asher, 2007), even these descriptions appear partial compared with fully phenomenological accounts. Indeed the assignment of artificial categories based on apparent ethnic grouping or achievement levels does not allow for the lived experience or situated cultural identity of individuals; however, might some research methodologies help to see beneath these categories, showing how they have been constructed?

### **Methodological approaches**

Education is largely an applied discipline, and has a strong history of empirical methods. Whilst there has been some sustained criticism of the breadth and depth of empirical methods in the United Kingdom (Hammersley, 1997; Tooley and Darby, 1998), in particular criticism of a paucity of large scale quantitative studies, others suggest that validity in methodological approaches is attained through developing alignment between substantive and methodological aims (Atkinson, 2000; Edwards, 2002). Within the literature on diversity, we have sought and found diversity and education research that to a greater and lesser extent explores the intersection between content and method. We analysed these studies for their range of methodological approaches; *Experimental studies*; *Face to face interviews*; *Structured surveys*; *Ethnographic studies*; *Visits to homes to understand cultural contexts*; *Case studies to observe how policies are interpreted and implemented*; *Semi-structured interviews with stakeholders*; *Visual narratives*; *Secondary analysis of data sets*. But more importantly, comparing the substantive content of the studies with their methods provided us with clues for our own project on how empirical research might capture the intricate and complex nature of identity formation through education, so that these findings may be applied to future developments in schooling (i.e. at the level of teachers' practice as well as contribute to conceptualisation and policy in systems of schooling).

While each of the studies found were concerned with the construction of diverse identities, we suggest that in each case the methods reveal nuanced differences in how the relationship between the individual and society is conceived. For example, Nesdale et al's (2007) experimental study assumed *a priori* that ethnicity and gender categories defined outside of the experiences of their research participants are a worthwhile site of investigation when considering children's perceptions of similarity and difference. They disclosed that their method did not allow for exploration of the children's own groupings and limited the children's role as expert informers, unlike Higgins and Nairn's (2006) study of young people that was explicitly designed to uncover the young people's own aspirations and definitions of success, yet was limited in explanation of where these definitions had come from and what role the social setting of school had played in their construction. It was our questions about the complex interplay between external forces and the internal dynamics of identity in these studies, and where a project on diversity and schooling should put its emphasis that lead us back to theoretical literature on subjectivity. In the development of our methodological approach we have drawn upon theories of learning and subjectivity; we turn now to consider some theories underpinning our approach.

### **Theoretical underpinning**

Much existing research refers to the primacy of the social, within the communities of practice operating in educational settings (e.g. Lave and Wenger, 1991). The social construction of learning and of identity is widely accepted, but we consider that insufficient notice is given to the way in which the social is mediated and refined by individual interpretation. We follow Wenger (1998) in that educational communities of practice may overlap or collide with other communities of practice between which individual learners move. Conflict occurs when learners' subjective conceptualisations of diversity and those of their home and community are at odds with those of school. We hypothesise that greater congruence between these local and subjective conceptualisations of diversity, means greater potential for achievement (Faas, 2008). However, macro-level conceptualisations of diversity through government policy and media portrayal may serve to polarise more nuanced local interpretation (Savelsberg and Martin-Giles, 2008) just as local interpretation may distort macro-level policy intentions (Faas, 2008).

In recent years, national educational policies in England and Wales have placed the individual at the centre of schooling through the notion of personalised learning (Department for Education and Skills, 2004; 2006). This construct implies sensitivity to the learner as an individual in society, acting on as well as being acted upon by society. However, relative agency depends on how individuals perceive themselves as able, and are allowed, to make a difference to their unfolding lives. For example in schooling, Mills (2008) argues that Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, cultural capital and field do allow for agency in transforming a constrained world, but that this possibility needs support through a school's ethos and pedagogy. We argue that micro level interactions, oftentimes embodied in participatory action between learners and teachers, convey the greatest possibilities for agency and transcendence (see Shotter, 1998).

We suggest that personalised approaches are made problematic when one fails to take account of the embodied nature of subjectivity (e.g. Kelly, 1963), and may fall into a trap of ‘verbocentrism’ (Sampson, 1998)). A rejection of dualism between mind and body implies that what we do is as important as what we say. Reflecting upon the embodied nature of subjectivity has led us to consider how we might also explore physicality within our participants’ responses, such as in the case study stage of our research where we intend taking our informants to physical locations that intensify their recall of events in order that we might also heighten their affective and cognitive recollections of difference. Of course, the context and physicality of events are also subjectively constructed and reproduced through signifiers; it cannot be taken as ‘truth’. Yet, research that for example asks teachers questions about their pedagogy rather than exploring how that pedagogy is received may tend towards a ‘notion of experience and activity held by teachers [that] is one which presumes that there can exist an unmediated relationship between subject and object, between knower and known, between the subject and the physical world (Walkerdine, 1988, 159). Our methods therefore shift the role of principal informant to the young person, paying attention to subjectivity in congruence with the content of our investigation.

### **Fit for purpose – an evolving methodology**

What has been the effect of our investigations into theory and methods on our methodology? Our investigations supported our contention that existing conceptualisations of diversity tend to be imposed and that methods used to explore diversity issues tend to reproduce extant classifications; yet also point to an increasing acknowledgement of and dissatisfaction with this situation. Policy documents and literature on diversity are frequently concerned with how diversity impacts on attainment, criminal justice and social inequalities but do not address how tensions between imposed categories and lived identities may influence such outcomes. Our collaboration began with ideas about looking at classroom practice and talking to teachers about planning for diversity; we became increasingly dissatisfied with this plan because it ignored how ‘difference’ was received in schooling.

This led us back to our fundamental question, which was, ‘how have young people constructed themselves and been constructed as different from one another’ to consider what methods this question implied.

### **Data collection methods**

Focusing on the following three interrelated contexts enabled us to place the subjectivity of our participants at the centre of the contexts within which diversity and identity are constructed.

- 1) inter-subjective relationships (micro);
- 2) relationships with institutions such as school, home and community (meso) and
- 3) macro-level relationships such as nationality, media representation and global citizenship.

Developing this frame led us to propose the following methods of data collection for our research.

### ***Stage One: Focus Group Interviews***

Four groups of between four to six young people drawn from the educational destinations of 18-19 years olds (Higher Education (HE), Further Education and training (FE and training), employment and “not in employment, education or training” (NEET)) will be formed to assist in providing direction on the language and concepts of diversity we use in our study. Their interaction around the theme of “diversity” will allow us to build a corpus of concepts, issues and language that are grounded in young people’s experience of difference (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; Clarke, 2002; Waite et al, 2005) from which to construct our instruments for Stages Two and Three, and to rehearse, develop and corroborate the design of the method for the next stage of data collection.

### ***Stage Two: Mapping Exercise***

Here we propose the trial and development of conceptual and visual mapping methods that can be used across large populations. We intend to offer a choice of data collection methods such as life history time lines (Woodward, 1997), free association (Clarke, forthcoming), and ‘concept mapping’ (Fox et al, 2007) to elicit young people’s perceptions of diversity, and encode data in a quantitative form. In this project we will not seek a representative sample; however, demographic information will be gathered to compare subjective accounts of difference with generalised categories. We will invite them in groups of approximately 24 to attend one of six sessions held in different locations (both institutional and community venues) to recollect significant events, locations and relationships where they experienced difference and record recollections in one of four techniques. Care will be taken not to close down communication through overly-structuring this data collection phase (Clarke, forthcoming; Drewery, 2005).

### ***Stage Three: Case Study***

We will select four participants from the Stage Two sample on the basis of richness and variety of responses, and their interest in taking part in ongoing research. These four young people will form the central focus of four case studies, providing leads to further data sources, as they direct the research team towards locations, historical events and people who are significant in the young people’s memories of experiencing difference. The researchers will explore these leads through interviewing, observation and content analysis to co-construct with the participants rich accounts of the processes that lead to, and experiences of, ‘being different’. This represents an innovative and challenging phase of the research, but we regard it as important to try to gather in-depth evidence of subjectivity.

### **Planned analysis**

Data analysis will occur in the following four stages:

### ***Stage One: Focus Groups***

The focus group transcripts will be analysed along three dimensions:

1. for indications of an appropriate language for discussing issues to do with diversity, subjectivity, identity, difference and personalisation in the second stage;
2. to identify issues relevant to this cohort that may prompt their reflection upon difference and diversity;
3. to provide indicators for the kinds of temporal, geographic and human relationships that we will refer to in the Stage Two: Mapping Exercise.

### ***Stage Two: Mapping Exercise***

Foremost, the data generated through the mapping exercise will be examined as descriptive data, determining patterns of occurrence throughout the sample (see Haggis, 2004) and representing these through graphic means (e.g. scattergrams). Although it is not possible to elucidate *a priori* what factors may emerge, we anticipate identifying the types of people, locations and events that have been influential in our sample of 18 year olds' experiences of difference. However, since we are also considering the significance of specific experiences of difference to wider social provision, we will be working with a statistician to consider what general inferences can be made from our dataset. For example, we may apply a multilevel analysis to our dataset to examine the proportionate effects of different kinds of temporal, spatial and inter-subjective factors upon young people's conceptualisations of difference. In this way we will explore the potential of numerical analyses for identifying patterns in complex individual 'stories', and consider whether subjective accounts of difference can provide us with new variables (as opposed to traditional ethnicity, gender, etc.) that are useful for public provision. We recognise that the small number in this project will constrain how representative the sample can be and therefore our multilevel modelling, but we primarily intend to test the possibilities of encoding qualitative data in different formats to quantitative form. A larger sample would be used in a subsequent study if the encoding process proves successful.

### ***Stage Three: Case Study***

The researchers will work with the case study participants to synthesise data into interpretive accounts that reflect how influences cohere and coalesce in subjective experiences of difference. Whilst the data may be drawn from a very wide array of sources, the accounts will be specifically concerned with the effects of these experiences on schooling. They will be thematically coded to examine in detail how each of the four case study participants have experienced difference within temporal and geographic contexts, as well as through their interpersonal relationships, and how these participants have conceptualised difference.

### ***Stage Four: Comparative Work***

We will undertake a cross-phase analysis of conceptualisations of difference and diversity, comparing our findings from the Mapping Exercise and Case Studies with findings from our literature review. We are particularly interested in comparing the

general findings from the Mapping Exercise, regarding young people's own conceptualisations of diversity, with representations of difference in policy and research regarding schooling. We also undertake to compare our study findings with findings from other studies, both general and specific in nature, in order to investigate the possibilities of our methodology for informing general provision of schooling. We will further theorise how the methodology used has supported our aim to adopt more nuanced and person-centred approaches to diversity research and develop our understanding of how practices within schools and their communities impact on outcomes for young people.

### **Conclusion**

Studies of schooling have approached diversity from many different perspectives but rarely attend to personal concepts of difference through both content and method. How difference is described and thought about may be particular to individuals and personalising the language will help us to better understand the stories constructed. It also makes the individual the starting point for a common understanding of difference. Personalised learning represents an educational attempt to approach the diverse needs of individuals from a person-centred perspective. However, other policy initiatives such as the amalgamation of the public commissions on racial equality, disability and equal opportunities into a single Commission on Integration and Cohesion could either signal a greater recognition of the complex make-up of learners' identities, or to imply an amalgamation of 'other than the norm' and a potential loss of fine tuning of educational responses. Does it indicate that social cohesion can be achieved by emphasising commonalities and relying on 'inclusion' to create more homogeneity by reducing multicultural or 'special educational' approaches? We remain sceptical of the effectiveness of such an approach, especially in consideration of the problems that occur for 'different' individuals when teachers interpret inclusion as assimilation (Rietveld, 2005; Higgins et al, 2006). Recent case study research by Faas (2008) in two English secondary schools suggests that inclusive multiculturalism and hybrid-multidimensional identities may be successful in creating community cohesion and raising achievement, while conflict between school and community values may encourage differentiated nationalistic identities. Clearly, the implementation of policy in specific educational contexts is fraught with variability in interpretation and practice, which may serve to undermine any principles enshrined at policy level and necessitate a careful consideration of how local factors may filter and transform top-down initiatives. Our research is founded in a personalised approach to diversity but will also compare such understandings with policy level rhetoric and will explore relationships between them. Gergen (1998, p119) suggests that 'it is the rhetoric of experimental procedure that ultimately serves to vivify or render realistic the otherwise arcane argot of the theorist [leading to] plausible understandings of human nature'. Located at the intersection between theoretical notions of self and the practice of schooling, we hope we have developed an empirical method that will make more vivid the arcane knowledge of difference and its lived reality through schooling.



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