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## **Becoming a teacher in a global city: superdiversity and workplace constraints**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper will discuss diversity training for trainee teachers on a Post Graduate Certificate of Education at a University in London where superdiversity (Vertovec, 2006) is a feature of the 'convivial multiculturalism' (Gilroy, 2004) reflected in the shops and restaurants around the University and in the diversity of both the University student population and the group of trainee mathematics teachers who are the focus of this article. After a discussion of initial diversity training for all trainee teachers it considers a diversity training session in which three mathematics trainees describe their own experiences as part of school based training. The analysis draws on critical race theory, in particular Rollock's (2012) description of rules of engagement and microaggressions, to challenge the idea of convivial multiculturalism in the school workplace. It focuses upon both the experience of the three presenters and the different positions taken by different participants in the ensuing discussion amongst the whole group. The names of all participants in the research have been changed.*

**Keywords:** *superdiversity, recognition, whiteness, microaggressions*

### **Initial training at the university**

The University offers a series of professional studies mornings which through lectures and workshops allows trainees to develop and consider key issues in their professional development which are not covered in the sessions deliberately dedicated to curriculum areas. One of these is dedicated to a consideration of diversity issues and how policy has developed in this area in ways which:

*Prompt critical thinking and unsettle the assumptions which most trainees use when thinking about issues of social inclusion (Francis, Lecturer)*

Francis structured the field of education with reference to diversity and inclusion by making reference to UK government statistics demonstrating different outcomes for different groups and by developing from the MacPherson Report(1999) the case of institutional racism, itself often made invisible by the power and assumptions of Whiteness (Rollock & Gillborn, 2011).

Discussion groups focussing on particular scenarios sometimes promoted lively exchanges. Francis reported that older black trainees with experience of living in parts of London with large black populations were particularly vociferous on matters of race

inequality. This was challenging for other trainees and reflected the ways in which the power of whiteness renders the experience of people of colour invisible and could be challenging when articulated to others (Rollock 2012). Francis commented that discussions of particular scenarios were sometimes heated and he found it difficult to settle the audience in order to move to the next part of the lecture.

There was subsequently opportunity for further discussion of relevant scenarios in smaller study groups. In these discussions, like in the earlier lecture, individuals often relied upon their personal biographies to inform their position which reflected what one lecturer facilitator, James, referred to as their '*own version of London*' (James). He reported that, although this led to discomfort for some from outside the London area, trainees were in general comfortable talking about race but:

*They never questioned their own fairness. They would assume they treat everyone equally. Although I guess this is the point of institutional racism, they are not aware of it, but they would say I am not racist* (James, Lecturer)

This reliance on biography meant that individuals were without a critical awareness of either self or the ways in which they were positioned by the discourses of whiteness. It was a comfort that was occasionally unsettled by the arrival and proximity of different bodies or 'space invaders' (Puar, 2004). Whilst it is common to see women throughout the University wearing hejab to cover their head, James recounted the difficulties for himself and the trainees in the room when a young woman arrived who had chosen to cover her face, which created an uncertainty and '*an awareness that everyone had. You could sort of feel it*' (James). No one else in the group was able to talk about this. It was left to the woman herself to send out signs of recognition by talking fondly of her own school days in what was for all to hear a confident and broad East London accent. This was an agency borne of familiarity of working with these embodied recognitions described by Fanon as 'the look' (Fanon, 1967) and developing a way of managing this both for herself and for her observers by what Rollock (2012) refers to as 'rules of engagement' referring to the

*'constantly developed complex forms of strategising for survival; acts to which much of WhiteWorld (Gillborn 2008,162) is completely oblivious'* (Rollock 2012:72)

It is to a further consideration of the role of rules of engagement during the school placement to which I shall now turn.

### **Rules of Engagement and the experience of trainee teachers in schools**

The mathematics group for which I am responsible is always very diverse both in terms of languages spoken and colour of skin. In this context I adopt strategies to acknowledge and unsettle discourse of whiteness ranging from the history of mathematics to acknowledging both formally, and as occasion arises humorously, my own raced position as a white man. During their first school placement a number of trainees discussed issues which reflected their own 'strategizing for survival' (Rollock 2012:72) and agreed to share these with their peers. I will now discuss their

contributions in a semi narrative structure in order to reflect the ongoing interaction amongst the group which occurred as each person made their presentation.

### **Demircan: Being Turkish Cypriot in school**

Demircan had chosen to hide his Turkish identity in his precious job as an accountant in a top London firm. In his school there were a significant number of children of Turkish descent and he described the challenges of now acknowledging his Turkish identity by describing three situations.

*I got to know a Turkish boy. He asked me what football team I supported. I said Galatasary and when he came in to my lessons he worked hard. I sort of connected with him by being Turkish and I saw another side of him I suppose (Demircan)*

This recognition was entirely comfortable for Demircan. He was able to acknowledge the particular knowledge and loyalties that were part of his Turkish Cypriot background and this contributed directly to what he saw as being a part of his emerging professional identity as a teacher that is ensuring that pupils work hard and make progress whilst he was responsible for a class.

*I was walking down the corridor with one of the senior teachers and a group of naughty girls came up to me and said 'Sir are you Turkish'? (Demircan)*

In this point Demircan was unsure about being Turkish in the company of a senior member of staff and unsure how to respond. Rather than being an easy acknowledgement of being Turkish we can see in his reference to 'naughty' (Demircan) that, in combination combined with a range of possibly embarrassing gender inflections, it presented a dilemma. For the audience the acknowledgement of this greeting seemed to be unproblematic and many agreed with the comment of one who said, 'you should be proud of what you are', although for Demircan particularly, with his history of invisibility in the face of the unspoken somatic norms (Puwar,2004) of accountancy firms, the acknowledgement of such pride was not unproblematic. In this context the micro performance of recognition, and the subsequent possibility of what Rollock (2011) refers to as micro aggressions, was not without tensions as Demircan acknowledged:

*Well yes I did say yes in the end even though I must say because we are discussing this in private that I did not feel comfortable with this (Demircan)*

The discussion here was wide ranging and there was a sense that these inconvenient recognitions were part of a teacher's life ranging from the comment by a trainee from Hungary who commented that, 'they just want to know where you are from. There is no harm in that', (Zsofika) to a trainee from Newcastle who, reflecting on his own experience, said, 'You get that all the time in Essex because there everyone is only from Essex' (Nat). Both of these quotes show how difficult it can be for others to imagine, and hence offer solidarity, to the affects of these micro aggressions as they understand them

in terms of their own biographies and are their significance, inflected by the invisibility of whiteness, is minimised.

By way of contrast Abiola, himself of Nigerian descent, who had been brought up in the UK and commented:

*I was coaching basketball and some people asked me where I was from. I looked at them to gauge where they were coming from. After I decided they were ok I said: 'Yes I am from Nigeria. I am proud of that but you don't want it taken in the wrong way.'(Abiola)*

The process of gauging why pupils were asking questions was part of the rules of engagement described by Rollock (2012) and which perhaps Abiola had learnt through his own experience.

When Demircan presented the audience with his final situation he showed precisely the importance of this gauging process and how a declaration of identity, which some members of the audience had taken to be necessary as a matter of pride, could lead to a situation which compromised his emerging professional identity as a teacher:

*A boy said to me: 'That is a Turkish name. Are you Turkish?' I said 'Yes'. He immediately started talking to me in Turkish using bad language and calling to me (by my surname) right down the corridor Mataraci Mataraci (Demircan)*

In giving this example Demircan had come full circle from his first example where, in stark contrast to this example, it had been entirely a positive professional recognition as opposed to this one which led to ongoing difficulties which Demircan described as '*a personal issue that I am coming to terms with*' (Demircan).

### **Akubar: Can you help me with the Somali boys in my class?**

Akubar, a keen footballer and former youth worker, had come to the UK as a child, a refugee from the civil war in Somalia. His first school was in an outer London borough where 65% of the pupils were white. Early in the placement he described a colleague from another subject area coming to the maths office:

*They just looked round the door and, just checking, said: 'Are you Somali?' I said 'Yes' (laughing). 'Well then I have some difficult Somali boys in my class can you come and speak to them?' I was a bit surprised because they did not really know me, but I thought and then I said 'Yes'. (Akubar)*

Akubar's hesitation, which he referred to several times, was based on the fact that the teacher did not know him. It seemed to be informed by an assumption that the management of difference of diversity in schools is not the responsibility of all but the direct responsibility of teachers with specialist knowledge or perhaps, in this case, role

model responsibilities. In Akubar's words it informed assumptions about what would happen subsequently:

*They probably thought that I would talk to them in Somali and that I would tell them that they should behave better because they were Somalis. But that would have been interpreting and these boys were not EAL. They were second generation Somalis and felt that they belonged as much to the UK as Somalia. So we just spoke as I would speak to any other pupils about what was going wrong why they were not achieving their targets. We did not speak Somali at all (Akubar)*

Running through this report is what would be a main theme for Akubar, that the boys were 'just boys' (Akubar) and that it was important to get to know them as boys which, although as arguably limited as the categorisation as Somali, has the benefit of linking a relatively small minority to many other pupils in the school reflecting the importance of the intersectional analysis of Brah and Phoenix (2004). Furthermore Akubar's repeated request to treat them like boys, and their parents like any other parent who likes first to hear good things about their children, reflects upon how a sense of belonging changes over time and how this affects the second generation or, in Akubar's case, someone who had lived for most of his life in the UK.

In acknowledging, through laughing at points as he recalled these events, the way in which he was 'positioned' (Akubar) there was an awareness of how power worked in the process of recognition and interpellating him to a position he did necessarily wish to occupy. Akubar's understanding of these processes and the rules of engagement allowed him to act despite having reservations about the reasons that had motivated the request in the first place. Although he did not act to disturb these assumptions Akubar's humour allowed him not only to act, but to display his own appreciation of the processes of identity and the limitations of a view of Somali identity which assumed that all Somalis were the same, by the comment with which he ended his presentation:

*You can see that I have put this incident into my school experience file from this slide. I am making good progress with sorting all that out. But I haven't yet sorted out the problems of Somali boys (Akubar)*

### **Rubana: Racist abuse in the classroom**

Rubana who was born in the UK and was brought up in the East End of London stood confidently in front of the group wearing a hejab. She described her placement where, despite being in a school with a very diverse pupil population, she was the only teacher in the mathematics department to cover her head with a hejab. When Rubana turned to discuss the racist abuse she had experienced her speech patterns were suddenly marked by hesitation which underlined the difficulties of the act of speaking itself:

*And when I went to my placement I was called a certain name. I was called a Paki (Rubana)*

She did not expect to have to deal with personal racist abuse when she insisted, like any other teacher, that a boy get on with his work:

*I did not know what to do because I thought this was a professional institute. Why should a student call me a Paki? Like I didn't think it happened in schools. So I just turned around. I tried to send him out but he would not go. I didn't take it to heart because I had been called a Paki before. And when my mentor did come back his friends just backed him up and said that he did not call me a Paki. It was done so subtly and I know what I heard. It was my word against his. What would you do? (Rubana)*

She did not anticipate that the space and structures of a school would make possible the racism which she was familiar with in the streets which surrounded her home. We can see the difficulties of making a claim even in the context of school structures which enable staff to do so.

Initial responses from the audience focussed on the pragmatic response of maintaining discipline which focussed attention away from the comment itself. This was done by comparing stories of other insults in which, for example, Rebecca described her experience of being called a bitch which, nonetheless, did not compromise her position of power in the class, and that she had sent the pupils straight out of the class. This pragmatic response did not include an analysis of power embodied by Rebecca, a white woman, and was a clear contrast with the powerlessness that Rubana experienced as a result of racist name calling and categorisation. Striking a more sympathetic tone Alison commented:

*It is not nice and I have never been in that situation. I would try to tell a joke to relieve the situation. I would turn it on its head and make them silly. I would point out that it is not where I am from. I just wanted to know if you would feel confident about turning it around if it happened again (Alison)*

In seeking to make a joke out of racist name calling Alison appeals to the use of a sense of meaning which ignores the act and performance of speech itself to which Rubana was exposed and which the hesitation of her speech recalled.

Others believed Alison had missed the main point and this was summarised by Demircan when he said:

*I would just like to say that the word Paki is a derogatory term. It is not about where you are from Pakistan or Bangladesh or anywhere. (Demircan)*

This was echoed around the room. Fahima from Pakistan directly confronted Alison's theory of meaning by saying that she would still be offended by the use of the word Paki. Abiola raised the sense of values and a sense of professional collaboration as teachers:

*If somebody called me a rude word I would not like it. It is about how it has been used in the past. It's not a joke and it is not acceptable in class. And someone should back you up. (Abiola)*

Abiola describes the way in which language indexes (Blommaert, 2005) history and in advocating the need for a sense of professional solidarity and trust both recognises the pain and hurt (Ahmed, 2004) of abusive name calling and offers a practical way forward which does not, like the suggestions of Rebecca and Alison, leave the issue for Rubana to face alone despite sympathetic words of support.

### **Conclusion**

In superdiverse schools Demircan discovered that the option of invisibility was impossible and the ideas and practices of rules of engagement, shared by colleagues like Abiola and, throughout his presentation, by Abukar, allowed him to name and refine what he had previously considered as '*indirect racism*' (Demircan). Rubana's presentation showed how what many perceived as unacceptable racist abuse was questionable in some quarters of a superdiverse community.

The evidence of this paper makes clear that teaching trainees need to have the opportunity to share their own experiences of becoming teachers. There is otherwise a danger that it is assumed, in a global city of which superdiversity and the conviviality of multiculturalism are hallmarks, that microaggressions (Rollock, 2011) and potential for racial abuse do not exist as part of the everyday life in the school workplace. Further to this, at a time when teachers are often isolated in terms of the judgements about the examination performance of their pupils, the discussions I have documented show that acts of solidarity amongst colleagues reflect an important professional value in the ongoing struggle against racism in superdiversity.

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