

Construction of difference and diversity within policy and classroom practice in England: time to trouble

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Abstract

Policy and practice responses to diversity and difference in pupils' populations continue to challenge education systems around the world. This paper considers how teachers' understandings of diversity and difference and their pedagogical responses at the local level are influenced by, and can be reconciled with, policy at the general level with its impulse for categorisation, normalcy and 'ableness'. Two frameworks around orientations to diversity (Paine, 1990) and types of pedagogic need (Norwich, 1996) are combined in order to examine this tension and develop possible responses. The paper argues, that for critical, ethical and socially just pedagogies, policy needs to support teachers in acknowledging, questioning and troubling difference at the classroom level.

Key words: diversity, construction of difference, educational policy

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Introduction

Education systems around the world are attempting to address issues of social justice and equity and to respond to diversity and difference in pupil populations. England is no exception to this. In this paper we focus on how difference and diversity are constructed in education policy in England, particularly in relation to categorisation and normalcy, and how such policy and structural perspectives shape, and are mediated by, teachers' perceptions and constructions of diversity, to be translated into school practice. Diversity and difference are discussed in broad terms, and the specific example of 'special educational needs' as one type of difference is used in an illustrative way. We bring together two frameworks, layers of meaning or orientations (Paine, 1990) and types of pedagogic needs (Norwich, 1996), to develop understandings of the construction of difference and efforts to address diversity at the school/pedagogical level. We argue that for critical, ethical and socially just pedagogies, rather than over-simplification at a macro-social level, policy needs to support teachers in acknowledging, questioning and troubling difference at the classroom level.

Diversity and difference in educational policy: Categorisation and normalcy

In English educational policy, the concept and term *diversity* has been employed in a range of ways over recent years, variously linked with pedagogical response (QCA/DfEE, 1999; QCDA, 2009a), learner identity (DfES, 2007a; QCA, 2007), notions of entitlement and inclusion (QCDA, 2009a), and in relation to differences in attainment (DfE, 2011a). Some analyses of other countries' policies suggest that they are framed by specific conceptualising features: for example, in the USA, diversity is framed as multiculturalism featuring colour, culture, race and ethnicity (Brunner, 2006; Swartz, 2009); in Chile, disability is the framing concept (Infante & Matus, 2009). Diversity in English educational policy, however, seems to incorporate many dimensions of difference (for example, gender, social background, ethnicity, [dis]ability) although different emphases can be observed at different times and in different aspects of policy. Teachers are exhorted to address diversity and inclusion, to 'value diversity' (QCDA, 2009b) and the term may be imbued with positive connotations – as in 'celebrating diversity'.

The majority of policy discourse in England, however, positions diversity as ‘difference from the norm’ and is often referenced by disadvantage or deficit (see DfE, 2011a). It is also frequently understood and examined in relation to (lack of) attainment. Difference and diversity are framed by the type of data collection categories utilised for the national pupil database (DfE, 2011b). These include age, gender, ethnicity, language status, free school meal eligibility, special educational needs type and provision, disability status and level of national curriculum attainment. The data for such categories are, of course, amenable to being collected on a large scale and are ostensibly easily quantifiable, suggesting stability of categories. Such categorisations, however, tend to reduce subtle and complex characteristics; for example, known eligibility for free school meals is frequently assumed to align with, and taken as a proxy for, social class (see Hobbs & Vignoles, 2007). Allocation to categories is also situated and not always reliable, for example, allocation to special educational needs stages (DfES, 2001) is variable from local authority to local authority and even from school to school (Daniels & Porter, 2007; OFSTED, 2010).

Many of the types of difference encompassed in the database categories and in policy guidance are *apparently* self evident differences. As Ainscow, Conteh, Dyson and Gallanaugh (2007) remind us, however, what counts as ‘different’ changes over time and is rooted in differing school cultures and national education systems. Categories such as ‘special educational needs’, ‘learning disabilities’ (McClimens and Richardson, 2011), ‘dyslexia’ or ‘gifted and talented’ are ‘neither true nor real’ (Hollenweger, 2008, p12), but relate to the specific social context in which they have emerged and are meaningful to a society at a given point in time. The meaning of such category labels may change over time or be changed by policy action. For example, the label ‘special educational needs’ has been applied to approximately 20% of the English school population since the Warnock report (1978) suggested that 1 in 5 children might experience special educational needs. This proportion looks set to change as the Coalition Government’s Green Paper *Support and Aspiration: A New Approach to Special Educational Needs and Disability* (DfE, 2011b) sets out plans to reduce the perceived over identification of special educational needs (OFSTED, 2010) and proposes a single school-based category of special educational needs. Thus the category ‘special educational needs’ will have a changed meaning as a result of policy action.

Through this socially constructed nature of types of difference and categories, difference is then constructed and understood within the context of normative beliefs, structures and

frames (Molloy & Vasil, 2002). It is defined and maintained through notions of normalcy and, in turn, normalcy is constructed and sustained in relation to this difference, so normalising practices tend to perpetuate. Official statistics and policy texts embody such beliefs and structures, laying out dimensions of difference and licensing particular dimensions of what diversity means, producing ‘the limits and possibilities of being named a vulnerable student’ (Infante & Matus, 2009, p439), of being identified as ‘different’. For example, the policy emphasis on standards with accompanying age-related attainment expectations and age-specific learning objectives, evident in the English education context (Machin & Vignoles, 2006), presents a clear normative framework which influences the forms of difference which emerge and are taken notice of (Benjamin, 2005). Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2011, p79) similarly note the dominant ‘narrative of developmentalism’ and, drawing on Burman (2008), the standardisation of child development as following a ‘universal, regular and predictable pattern’. Children are designated as having ‘special educational needs’ if they have a learning difficulty requiring special educational provision and ‘a child has a learning difficulty if they have a significantly greater difficulty in learning than *the majority of children of the same age*’ (Education Act, 1996, added emphasis). Children designated as being ‘gifted and talented’ are ‘those who have one or more abilities developed to *a level significantly ahead of their year group*’ (DCSF, 2010, added emphasis). The definitions here are relative rather than absolute – children are defined and categorised in relation to age-related norms.

‘Ableness’ is thus a dominant referent here. Although ‘ability’ is defined in relative terms, and in psychological theory is frequently regarded as not being fixed (Sternberg, 1994), it tends to be treated by school systems and the routinisation of the organisation of schooling as stable and unalterable. It is then commonly viewed by teachers as an essential and fixed characteristic (Hart, Dixon, Drummond & McIntyre, 2004), rather than being seen as socially, culturally and economically constructed. Children have been referred to in government policy as being in three groups - ‘gifted and talented, struggling or just average’ (DfES, 2005a, p20). In other policy documentation, terms such as ‘the most able’ and ‘the least able’ are used (for example, in the Coalition Government’s remit for the review of the National Curriculum, DfE, 2011c). Children are also frequently described by teachers as ‘more able’ and ‘less able’ (Hart et al., 2004). Ball (2010, p162) purports that these ‘abilities’ are then ‘built into differentiations and opportunities and expectations in schools’ (for example, through the setting of children by ‘ability’) frequently becoming self-fulfilling in terms of pupil

performance. Ball (2010, p155) argues that this discourse of standards and attainment, which operates through the procedures of testing, benchmarks and league tables of schools, ‘totalises, individualises and commodifies the student as an “ability” – a cluster of performances’ and gives rise to ‘economies of student worth’ that value students differently. Children are seen in terms of the performances that might be expected of them and barriers preventing these are identified. As Ainscow et al. (2007, p9) explain,

‘Belonging to a particular ethnic group, or coming from a particular social background, or, even, having a particular gender, has a value insofar as it inhibits or facilitates the achievement of particular outcomes. Characteristics with a negative value are cast as obstacles to be overcome through policy and practice interventions.’

A category identifies according to some characteristic, then constructs those identified as different, as ‘other’. These classification systems can then become powerful tools, for example, in the distribution of resources (Hollenweger, 2008). This ‘categorise-and-intervene approach’ (Ainscow et al., 2007, p14) leads to interventions targeted at particular groups – for example, for white working class boys (DfES, 2005b). Such categorisation is then resistant to change. As Florian and McLaughlin (2008, p5) comment, what starts ‘as *a* way of organising information often becomes *the* way of understanding phenomena’.

Conceptualisations of difference: Generality and specificity

So far, then, we have commented on the wide ranging and rather disparate conceptualisations of diversity in education policy in England and have discerned the pervading influence of categorisation and normalcy discourses, particularly in relation to attainment and notions of ableness. However, as we have noted elsewhere (Boyask et al., 2009), there are also difficulties in transporting different conceptualisations between contexts, for example, from general government policy through guidance to specific and local practice in schools. Policies at a general level do not easily translate to the specific local example and do not necessarily make the difference they intend – an intention-reality gap (see Boyask et al., 2009; Fullan, 2001). Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard and Henry (1997) use the term ‘policy refraction’ to describe how policy intentions are distorted through the practices of people on the ground.

Engagement with policy happens at a local level, but, as Haggis (2004, p349) notes, the ‘factors responsible for patterning at the level of the general are not necessarily synonymous with the factors responsible at the level of the specific example’. Government policy is made at a general level based on broad patterns and broad data. Thus, for example, when asked

about diversity and inclusion teachers and headteachers generally seem committed to a broad *general* view, but *specific* perceptions and examples of difference are more situated. Sikes, Lawson and Parker (2007) found that teachers' and teaching assistants' *concept* of inclusion often accorded with some aspects of government, local authority or institutional *general* rhetoric and discourse, but that their own *stories* about inclusive practice frequently focused on the *specific* human and personal aspects of day to day involvement with individual pupils. How, then, can teachers' understandings of diversity and difference and their pedagogical responses at the local level be reconciled with policy at the general level with its impulse for categorisation and normalcy?

Teachers' understandings and practices around difference

To respond to this question, we draw upon and bring together two particular frameworks. We outline these frameworks, apply them to the English policy and practice context and use them in combination in order to consider possible pedagogical responses to diversity and difference.

The first is Lynn Paine's (1990) framework around understandings of diversity and difference developed in her work with pre-service teachers in the USA. This comprises four orientations or 'layers of meaning' evident in teachers' understandings of diversity - individual, categorical, contextual, and pedagogical. Paine presents her framework as *layers* rather than as distinct and separate understandings. This layering concurs with our analyses so far in two ways: firstly in that we have suggested that notions of difference and diversity are socially constructed and therefore variable according to time and context; secondly that there are differences between general policy level conceptualisations and specific day to day practice understandings and explications. Thus, a teacher's perceptions of diversity and difference may be from more than one orientation, varying according to context and, perhaps, with different children and groups of children.

Paine explains that an *individual difference* orientation to diversity involves the view that people are different in all sorts of ways and draws on psychological and biological explanations of diversity. Alternatively, from a *categorical differences* perspective, people are viewed as different according to their affiliation with particular categories, for example, social class, ethnicity or gender, but with little attempt to understand why those categories might have meaning or how they are socially constructed. Paine's (1990) third view of

diversity focuses on *contextual differences*; here the context matters because it gives meaning to difference and the causes of difference. ‘Contextual differences exist in part *because* of the social context; difference is understood as, in part, socially constructed’ (Paine, 1990, p3). Differences, in this orientation, are not fixed, but are ‘created, maintained, and changed by their interaction’ (p3). Finally, the *pedagogical view of difference* is one in which differences among individuals and groups are seen as having ‘consequences for teaching and learning’ (p3). Here the focus moves beyond causes of difference to the implications of those differences for pedagogical action in the classroom.

The second framework we draw upon is Brahm Norwich’s (1996) conceptualisation of needs. He proposes that children have three types of pedagogic need - individual, group and common. He describes individual needs as arising from ‘characteristics and goals which are unique to an individual and are different from all other children’ (p103). Group needs arise from characteristics shared by *some* others such as ‘emotional difficulty’ or ‘high musical abilities’. Common needs ‘arise from characteristics which are common to all children, such as the emotional need to belong and to feel related’ (p103). In applying this to understandings and considerations of difference, then, we may consider every child as different (as having individual needs), every child as having some similarities and some differences with others (as having group needs), and every child as being alike (as having common needs). Norwich argues for a three dimensional interactive model where these three types of need are considered together. Here, in the first instance, we examine each separately.

Our analysis follows three stages: first, we consider Paine’s first two layers of meaning together with Norwich’s first two types of need; next, we look at Norwich’s third type of need – common needs. Contradictions and questions emerge which are partly addressed in our final stage of analysis which draws upon Paine’s third and fourth layers of meaning and considers implications for practice.

Individual difference/needs and categorical differences/group needs orientations

Expression of understanding relating to both of Paine’s first two layers of meaning (individual difference and categorical differences) and to Norwich’s first two types of need (individual and group needs) can be observed in English education policy and practice as further explored below. Tensions are apparent within and between these. We contend that an individual difference/needs orientation obscures social categories and group needs.

Traditional macro-social categories, however, we suggest, do not take account of the full range of differences that affect life chances and can overgeneralise the effects of some categories of difference/group needs upon the lives of individuals, obscuring unique differences, personal subjectivities and experience.

Paine (1990) notes that a standard response to diversity is to individualise - such a tendency, we suggest, can be detected in English policy and practice. For example, we have earlier noted the individualisation of pupils as an 'ability' (Ball, 2010). The field of special educational needs also focuses on individualisation (Keil, Miller and Cobb, 2006) through, for example, the reductionist emphasis of individual education plans (Millward et al., 2002). Sikes et al. (2007) illustrate this individuated focus in their analysis of interview-conversations with teachers and teaching assistants about the concept and practice of inclusion. Inclusion was defined 'in terms of attempts to include *individual* excluded "others" ' (p367, added emphasis). Even when included these individuals were still regarded as 'other' owing to a characteristic that was seen to make them different. This individual difference and individual needs orientation directs teachers to seek the sources of pupils' problems, and the solutions to those problems, within the individuals concerned (Paine, 1990).

Regarding children as having *some* similarities and differences with others, leads to consideration of groups of children (Norwich's group needs) and thus points to group or categorical responses to difference and diversity, Paine's second orientation. For example, there are policies for specific groups such as 'gifted and talented' children (DCSF, 2008a) and intersections of groups, for instance, boys and ethnicity (DfES, 2007b). Teachers' understandings of difference are also framed around categorical difference. For example, Gazeley and Dunne's (2005) research in southern England suggests that teachers and trainee teachers often hold stereotypical ideas about pupils and parents according to their social class and they locate the source of a pupil's underachievement within the pupil or the home, rather than in the teaching and learning environment. Ho's (2004) analysis of labelling noted that people's expectations, attitudes and behaviour towards a child often change when they realise that the child has been categorised, for example, as having learning disabilities. We have already noted the dominance of attainment and ability as referents and teachers' perceptions about difference are frequently located within the context of these. If a teacher is concerned about the attainment of a child in their class, they are frequently led to thinking 'what is

wrong with this child?', taking an individual or categorical view of diversity, rather than considering, for example, how the assessment might privilege some groups rather than others.

Each of these two orientations, individual and categorical, presents problems and tensions. Taking an individual difference perspective can obscure commonality masking inequalities between social groups or systemic inequalities. Gazeley and Dunne's (2005, p1) research, for example, indicates that teachers' 'focus on *individual* underachieving pupils and on *individual* solutions tends to conceal inequalities related to social class' (added emphasis). By highlighting individual difference, Gillborn & Youdell (2000) purport, structural inequality may even be perpetuated. Taking a categorical perspective on difference and centring attention on group commonalities, on the other hand, may imply a simplistic understanding of difference which ignores the complexities of children's lives (Ainscow et al., 2007) - for example, perceiving that all boys underachieve in school (see Jackson, 1998 and DCSF, 2009). An alternative, perhaps, might be to consider Norwich's third type of need, common needs.

Common needs orientation and homogenisation

Centring on commonalities and regarding every child as alike appeared to underpin the English Labour government's Every Child Matters policy agenda (DfES, 2003) based on five outcomes for *all* children of staying safe, being healthy, enjoying and achieving, achieving economic wellbeing and making a positive contribution. At its heart this policy sought to place the child at the forefront of education, health and social care service delivery whilst changing the organisational ethos of those services. However, despite its apparent focus on *all* children, advocates for a specific group of children, disabled children, mounted an additional campaign - Every Disabled Child Matters (National Children's Bureau, 2006). The Every Child Matters policy was also critiqued for its lack of gender analysis (Daniel, Featherstone, Hooper & Scourfield, 2005) and for implementing early intervention and forms of surveillance for an ill-defined group of children who give 'cause for concern' (Parton, 2006).

Centring on commonalities and regarding every child as alike is regarded by some as 'naive egalitarianism' (Causey, Thomas & Armento, 2000, p34). In their US analysis, focusing on ethnic minority groups, they suggest that practices that attempt to homogenise students 'can serve to silence debates about the inequalities that do exist' (p38) – for example, in the case

of the Every Child Matters policy above, with regard to gender and disability. Notions of sameness, according to Allard (2006, p326), ‘negate material and/or embodied differences’ and therefore do not account for inequality and disadvantage (Audit Commission, 2002).

Interestingly, a related view to viewing all children as alike is to regard all children as having individual needs. This seems to underpin the personalisation agenda promoted by the Labour Government in England in the 2000s (DfES, 2004; DfES, 2007c; DCSF, 2008b). This focussed on *all* children, placing children at the centre of the system with personalised approaches to accommodate each child. We have noted here an inclination here, though, towards the *homogenisation of diversity* (Boyask et al., 2009) – that *all* children are regarded as different from each other, with all differences perceived as seeming equal, implying that all differences can be treated equally. Swartz (2009, p1049) notes how the concept of diversity in the US has collapsed different marginalised groups into a generalised category, subordinating and ‘invisibilising group identities’ into one diversity. This move towards general conceptualisation can also be seen in England in the 2007 amalgamation of the Disability Rights Commission, the Commission for Racial Equality and the Equal Opportunities Committee into one organisation – the Equality and Human Rights Commission, and the establishment of a single Equality Act (2010) amalgamating previously separate discrimination legislation on sex, race and disability. In Paine’s (1990) study, teacher trainees viewed all children as different but proposed ‘neutrality of difference’, that no one difference was more important than any other and that teachers should treat all students equally. At the same time, however, they treated difference as a problem. Paine describes one pre-service teacher’s response: ‘Her general orientation is to treat all students the same and expect the same of all, yet when asked about specific difference, she suggests applying different standards for different students’ (Paine, 1990, p12). Abbott, too, in her study of Northern Ireland headteachers’ perceptions, found that in espousing a whole school philosophy of inclusion, almost all headteachers said they were *both* ‘catering for individual difference’ and ‘treating all children the same regardless of ability, social class or cultural background’ (Abbott, 2006, p633).

There is a tension apparent here, too, a ‘dilemma of difference’ (Norwich, 2002). If we treat pupils the same, we neglect any considerations of difference and this might privilege students of the dominant cultural group and may not provide adequately for some children. Some analysts, for example, warn that the personalisation approach referred to above will maintain,

or even increase, educational inequalities, as those with cultural, intellectual and financial capital exploit the advantages of personalisation (Campbell, Robinson, Neelands, Hewston & Mazzoli, 2007). However, if we treat some children differently we may stigmatise and perhaps perpetuate inequalities. Further, treating everyone the same does not equate with fairness and equitability. The principle of equality assumes fairness by the uniform application of the same expectation, standard, or treatment, whereas the principle of equity acknowledges that applying the same treatment or standard to everyone without regard to individual differences does not necessarily have an equitable impact on members of all populations (Creamer, 2000).

How, then, can we respond to these concerns? In order to show, and then attempt to address inequalities, some commentators argue that difference *must* be acknowledged and identified (for example, Reindal, 2010). The argument here is that students *are* different and that differences *do* matter. However, we suggest it is important to note how these differences are acknowledged and/or produced through pedagogical relationships, which are also socially constructed. Paine's (1990) third and fourth layers of meaning around diversity may help us here.

Contextual and pedagogical views of difference: implications for practice?

As noted earlier a *contextual difference* orientation in Paine's framework pays attention to contextual factors in causation of difference and regards difference as partly socially constructed. In this relational orientation, Paine (1990, p3) suggests, 'differences among individuals occur in patterns, yet these patterns are seen as connected to a social situation or embedded in a larger, dynamic context ... differences (e.g. women/men) are not fixed and dichotomised, but created, maintained, and changed by their interaction'. A *pedagogical view of difference* considers the implications of such contextualised differences for interaction and teaching. Action is considered as being inseparable from recognition of difference. Bell, Horn and Roxas (2007, p124) elaborate: 'This does not mean that all differences require a teacher to change the way that she teaches. But it does mean that the teacher acknowledges and takes account of difference in her teaching and her students' learning'. Such an interpretation might mean the development of pedagogies of difference, rather than 'pedagogies of indifference' (Lingard, 2007), and might enable a teacher to think anew – what is my relationship to this child in this classroom regardless of external factors and predictions?

Taking a combination of these two, contextual and pedagogical orientations to difference, we argue, might enable the teacher to recognise difference, recognise their part in giving meaning to and co-constructing that difference and take account of this in their approach to teaching. From the contextual and pedagogical views, difference is viewed as more fluid and negotiated, as emerging from interactions and relations rather than simply an individual phenomenon or as defined by a category. Such negotiations of meaning considering ‘difference in the context of individual lives’ (Haggis, 2004, p348) seem important to us in terms of promoting social justice. If teachers are alert to such views of difference, it may ‘guard against tendencies to stereotype’ on the basis of generalisations (Haggis, 2004, p349), reminding practitioners not to make broader assumptions based on membership of any group or category, but to investigate such assumptions. Allard (2006), in the Australian context, proposes that approaches to diversity in teachers’ practice should note that relationships matter and that critical teaching skills are required, assessing the needs of diverse pupils as requiring different approaches rather than as regarding the pupils as problems. She suggests asking ‘What is working now and for whom and under what conditions?’ (p336) as a way for teachers to plan, select and alter their pedagogies. Further, in order to investigate assumptions based on individual or categorical understandings of difference, Boler and Zembylas (2003) argue for a ‘pedagogy of discomfort’, suggesting that there is an emotional element and impact to problematising these common sense assumptions. Thus, feelings of discomfort may be necessary aspects to troubling and attempting to step outside of normative beliefs, structures and frameworks.

Concluding thoughts

Diversity has become a mechanism for identifying and responding to difference (Swartz, 2009). However, policies intended to compensate for perceived inequalities sometimes also perpetuate the differences they were designed to address (Florian & McLaughlin, 2008) as the policies highlight difference as a problem. In this way, diversity continues to be framed around essentialised identities. On the other hand, if all are seen as different, there is a danger of homogenisation of diversity (Boyask et al., 2009). Both Benjamin (2005) and Swartz (2009) argue that ‘valuing diversity’ and ‘diversity-driven approaches’ have become rather empty terms. Benjamin suggests that people ‘think they are reconceptualising difference’ but they seek to ‘do away with difference’ and thus become ‘complicit in the work of shoring up existing relations of inequality’ (p176). Swartz (2009, p1062) similarly proposes that such approaches ‘serve to reify dominant social and school norms while suggesting that schools

are meritocratic environments where “all children can learn”’. Practically accommodating for difference by schools and teachers is challenging and policies do not always help. We contend, along with Matus (2005, cited in Infante & Matus, 2009), that diversity must be understood by teachers on the ground as an epistemological, relational, political and ethical matter. It must be troubled.

We propose that socially just pedagogies and equitable responses to diversity can only evolve in so far as they are grounded in personal experience, questioning, action and interpersonal relationships. This necessarily involves teachers engaging with Paine’s (1990) contextual and pedagogical views of difference to make sense of the complex situations they encounter. General categories used for central policy monitoring need contextualising and should not be used in isolation, or without questioning and troubling, at the school and classroom level. Categories of analysis need to serve local purposes as well as general. The role of policy here, as Ainscow et al. (2007, p16) propose, ‘is not to generate fixed categorisations and responses to those categorisations, but to support and facilitate responses that can be made at school and classroom level’. However, critical interrogation of categorisation that may emerge at many levels, including the local, can help to address tensions inherent in both acting to respond to the interaction of pupils’ individual, group and common needs and acknowledging the social construction of diversity.

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