

Equality and Diversity in the Curriculum: Exploring ethnic identity and appreciating cultural diversity in a group of nursing and social work students

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Abstract

Students on a joint nursing and social work programme had in the past joined up with social work students to study a module on individual development and change. This module focuses on human development through the life span and considers psychological and social factors that impact on human development. The traditional teaching approach was a lecture in the morning followed by a seminar in the afternoon, related to the morning's lecture content. Students expressed difficulties in the seminar on the development of ethnic identity and as a seminar leader, who came from an ethnic minority group, it was felt that there had to be a better way of engaging students in identifying with and sharing aspects of their ethnic identities with peers and seminar leaders. Chavez and Guido- DiBrito (1999) in their review of how ethnic identity influences adult learning called for educators to create multicultural learning communities where there is balance between the different cultural norms. To achieve this, Gardner (1997) supports different activities that encourages reflection, discussion and using visual, written and relational learning styles whilst Warren (2004) supported mixed group, inclusive practices

Introduction

The paper reflects an approach taken to raise ethnic and cultural awareness of students on a joint nursing and social work programme. The main drivers for the change in approach to this will be explored in relation to the Equality and Diversity Strategy for Salford University and Section 71(1) of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act of 2000. Various ways of making the curriculum more accessible and strategies to promote student integration are discussed and data collected from the evaluation of the approach suggested that students had a better understanding of their peers from diverse ethnic groups and reaffirmed their own ethnic identities, which is reflected in the models of ethnic identity development (Phinney 1990 and Chavez 1998)

The Joint Nursing and Social Work Programme

The above programme has been in existence since 1995 as a collaboration between two schools in two neighbouring universities. In 2005 the University of Salford became the sole provider for the programme. This is now a venture between two schools in the same faculty. Since its inception the programme has evolved from certificate to degree level and from very separate professional demarcations to integration of theory and practice modules. Graduates from the programme can register with the Nursing and Midwifery Council on the Learning Disability part of the register and the General Social Care Council as a generic social worker. They have to meet the requirements and competencies of both professional bodies to pass the course.

In previous years, the students had teaching on different cultures at the end of the programme and these were sessions delivered mainly by outside speakers. Although these sessions had been well evaluated, the students did not have to think critically about the effects of culture on practice nor how their own culture impacts on their practice. The issue of ethnicity and ethnic identity was covered in a module called Individual Development and Change but the students and the author as seminar leader in 2005 struggled to engage meaningfully in the seminar on ethnic identity. Students were asked to discuss issues using a questionnaire based around their own ethnic identity. Consequently when the author took over the role of module leader for the module in 2006, this was one area for development.

Influencing Factors

Chavez and Guido- DiBrito (1999) in their review of how ethnic identity influences adult learning called for educators to create multicultural learning communities where there is balance between the different cultural norms. To achieve this, Gardner (1997) supports different activities that encourage reflection, discussion and using visual, written and relational learning styles whilst Warren (2004) supports mixed group, inclusive practices. Turner (2006) made a good case for why and how the curriculum should be made more inclusive to students. The areas discussed whilst identifying specific groups of students, are applicable to all students and this became a basis for exploring how the author could "transform the curriculum".

The author's ethnic identity and experiences did influence the approach. Being a member of a British Ethnic Minority (BME) group, her previous experiences of supporting BME students has been around academic writing and use of English as a second language and personal support. She is a member of the School of

Nursing's strategic group on BME issues and is committed to the principles of widening participation. Yoder (2001) in her study on effective strategies for teaching ethnically diverse nursing students found that the main factors for educators in accommodating the needs of ethnically diverse students are their lived experiences, their past experiences of contact with ethnically diverse students, their level of cultural sensitivity and their level of commitment to equality. The University updated its policy on equality and diversity and one of the four generic goals of the Equality & Diversity Strategy for Salford University 2006 – 2015 (http://www.equality.salford.ac.uk/ed_strategy.php) is fostering awareness and understanding of equality and diversity. The strategy aims to promote equal opportunities for staff and students and to celebrate diversity. Other external drivers like the Race Relations (Amendment) Act states that you must have due regard to the need to perform 3 main functions; of which the work undertaken had aimed to do just one :- promote good relations between people from different racial groups.

The Approach

The first aim of this piece of work was to promote cultural awareness within the peer group and to discuss how culture influences our practice within a theory module which covered development and change in a lifespan. Secondly, the teaching and learning methods used had to deliver content that met the learning outcomes. Students had to have developed key transferable skills related to the module. The most relevant module outcome that the seminars related to was describe and evaluate human development and behaviour as influenced by social factors such as poverty, gender, culture, race and ethnicity and disability. The relevant syllabus content was the development of ethnic identity (theoretical models of ethnic identity – Phinney and Cross), research studies on ethnic identity, threats to identity, importance of identity and application in Nursing and Social work practice. For death and dying, it was to explore cultural and religious beliefs related to this part of lifespan. The transferable skills to be developed were to demonstrate oral communication skills in presenting and debating issues in seminar groups and to make use of IT in using online resource.

The Group and The Teaching and Learning Method

In a group of twenty four students, there one South Asian student, one student of African Caribbean descent, two students from the African continent and twenty were white British. Of the two seminar leaders, one was white British and the other was Chinese. Seminar leaders were included as part of the group during the seminars to create an environment of sharing and inclusion (Warren, 2004). Students were asked to bring in three items that represented or signified their ethnic identity. They had to tell their peers what the items were and how they represented their ethnic identity (Gardner, 1999 and Warren, 2004). The original idea of using artefacts to help students to talk about their culture first came from an activity that the author's child was doing at her primary school. Children were encouraged to bring their favourite toy to school and to share with the other children why the toy they brought was their favourite. On recalling her day's experience the eight year old child was able to articulate her reasons and was able to relate the reasons for her friends' choices and commented on the similarities in the reasons for choice.

Whilst this is a fairly simple, adequate thought had to be given to how using artefacts could help students identify with their own ethnic identity, how their cultural knowledge could be used to inform the rest of their peers, the issues that could arise for the students in the group and barriers to participation. The usual format of teaching in the module is a lecture in the mornings, followed by seminars in the afternoons. At the beginning of the modules students were informed of the module outcomes, key transferable skills and the teaching and learning methods used to achieve the learning outcomes. Students were asked to bring in three items that represented their ethnic identity and to tell the group about it and how these items represented their ethnic identity. They had three weeks to prepare for this work and seminars leaders were available for support and advice.

Solomon and Perkins (1998) discussed the tools or artefacts used in social learning and concluded that these could be physical implements, technical procedures or symbolic resources. These could be used to provide information or serve as a vehicle for symbolic communication. The students from BME groups had no problems deciding what to bring and they used clothing and headgear, foodstuffs, eating implements, DVD portraying a belief system and photographs of extended family members. The white British students struggled with choosing something to bring that could reflect their ethnic identity and this is noted by (Chavez and Guido- DiBrito,1999) who argued that the culture of the dominant groups are so entrenched in daily lives that they have become the norm. Each student had to show the group the items they had brought and informed

their peers about what they meant and how they represented their ethnic identity. Questions were asked to further inform or clarify information that the students presented.

Seminars and presentations were used as means of enabling students to actively participate in the learning. Active learning has been defined as any form of learning where the learner has some control over what and how learning take place (Prince, 2004) and involves the students engaging in some activities. This could be in groups working cooperatively as in the seminar on loss and bereavement where students had to work in small groups to present information that they had gathered. A variety of sources including gathering information using information technologies was used to achieve the set task of describing how different cultures deal with death, in terms of care of the body, rites and rituals, beliefs relating to death and dying and the afterlife. The different cultures the students had to research were Christians, Muslim, Hindu, Chinese, Jewish and Sikh. This enabled students to develop the key skills of communicating information and making use of IT including online resources and then present it in a coherent and logical manner using a variety of media.

Evaluation of the Teaching and Learning Method: using artefacts to inform others about ethnic identities.

Students were asked to complete a questionnaire anonymously, which focused on five aspects of learning. These five aspects were; what they had learnt about their peers, about themselves, issues encountered in their preparation and why did they think they occurred, application to practice setting and effectiveness of the method of learning. (See appendix One). Questionnaires can be used to collect information which may be of a personal nature as anonymity can be maintained. (May, 2002)The questions used were open questions which allowed students to write down what they thought. Students were requested to return the questionnaires in the same afternoon and seminar leaders facilitating the afternoon session reminded the students to complete and return them. It was presented to the students that their feedback would greatly help in future planning and development of the module. A total of 20 completed questionnaires were returned.

Results of the Evaluation

What have you learnt about yourself from this seminar?

The comments ranged from learning more about own ethnic identity to “didn’t know a lot about my own culture and find it hard and uncomfortable to express feelings and show belongings that meant a lot” Influences on the development of ethnic identity were identified as family, religion and other people. Two students commented on how listening to others was important. Some students felt that they did not have anything special to bring to show the group.

What have you learnt about your peers from the seminars?

Most students commented on personal information that they had gathered from the presentations of artefacts and discussion that they would otherwise not have known about their peers. They also commented on the similarities in the group but noted that even though most of the students were white British, each individual was unique.

What issues did you encounter in your preparation for this seminar and why do you think this occurred?

There were three main trends to this question. Six members of the group encountered difficulties in finding items to represent their ethnic identity because they did not have clear ideas about it. The second trend was about difficulties in talking to the group about personal/private issues. The third was that once they got started there were loads of artefacts they could have brought and three was a bit limiting. One student left that question unanswered and one said there was no issue.

How may the learning help you in the health and social care settings?

There were three main themes to this question. These were about communication skills especially listening, understanding of different cultures and what is valued plus uniqueness of individuals and that respect for these are essential for good working relationships.

How effective was the method of “Bring and tell” in helping you to share aspects of your ethnic identity and in learning about others’ ethnic identity?

All the students had positive comments apart from one who left it blank. The students felt that the visual artefact helped them to concentrate and to present their information whilst they were in front of the group and also when they were listening, the artefact kept their interest as they could look at or touch them. They

learnt a lot about the different cultures and ethnic groups which they had not expected. It was noted that the method created discussions and students could explain reasons for their actions but that for one student it was not as successful personally because s/he felt that it was too private a topic to be discussed in a group.

Discussion

The results of the evaluation suggested that the aims were met. Students learnt about different cultures and from their peers. It showed that there are many aspects to ethnic identity and some commonalities in the way ethnic identity is constructed. This is supported by Cheung (1993) who defined ethnic identification as:

"the psychological attachment to an ethnic group or heritage" (p. 1216)

Phinney(2003) agreed to some extent, in that ethnic identity refers to one's identity, or sense of self as a member of an ethnic group but added that it was a multi dimensional construct that changes over time as individuals become more aware of their ethnicity and within a broad sociocultural setting. She also stated that ethnic identity is only important when different groups are in contact over a period of time. The topic of ethnic identity is important to nursing and social work students because of the nature of the profession. The students are in contact with people from different ethnic groups requiring health care or welfare support. Knowledge of different ethnic groups and cultural practices would help students to understand the needs of the people they are supporting. They also need to have an awareness of how their culture influences their values and professional practices.

Researches on the development of ethnic identity agree that an achieved identity is the result of a crisis or awakening, which leads to a period of exploration or experimentation and finally to a commitment or incorporation of one's ethnicity (Phinney 1989). In their review of models of racial and ethnic identity, Chavez and Guido-DiBrito (1999) noted Kratz's model of white ethnic identity which described fifteen values of white Americans but does not discuss how consciousness of the white identity was triggered or developed. The majority of work appears to discuss ethnic identities of minority groups, therefore there is little comparative literature on the dominant group. This is not very helpful for white students who may want to find out more about the process or for educators who needs supporting literature to help with exploration and discussion on this area.

Most students viewed the teaching and learning method of "bring and tell" as successful in helping learn about different ethnic groups and culture. Some students found it difficult to decide on what to bring which represented their ethnic identity. This was suggested by Chavez and Guido-DiBrito (1999) may be due to the experiences white students have of being educated in environments that is grounded in their culture. These students may be resistant to learning methods that are outside the norm and may lack skills in multi-cultural learning and self reflection. On the other hand students from ethnic diverse backgrounds are more competent in negotiating multi cultural learning environments because they have had to adapt to learning environments grounded outside their own cultural norms. They also cautioned educators against reliance on choosing learning environments that feel right and comfortable for them as they may be creating learning environments based on their own cultural norms and not one that is multi cultural.

Conclusion

This small project demonstrated that using an active form of learning to raise awareness of different ethnic identities encouraged the students to think about their own ethnic identity and reflect on what they have learnt from their peers. There were some thoughts about how this learning could be applied in practice settings. The method used was designed to engage ethnically diverse students but also confirmed that some students from the dominant group struggled with this. It was not clear whether this was due to the context of speaking in front of a group about what was thought to be personal issues or whether as suggested by Chavez and Guido-DiBrito (1999) the students were entrenched in learning in a white dominant culture and were unskilled in multicultural learning.

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