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Shakespeare and racial diversity for Primary children: exploring ways to develop student teacher confidence

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Shakespeare and racial diversity for Primary children: exploring ways to develop student teacher confidence

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Abstract

This research paper examines student teachers' development, of pedagogy and understanding, in the areas of creativity and racial and ethnic diversity and identity. This dual focus emerges from critical reflection on the teaching of a new module to white students within their Initial Teacher Education (ITE) course. The students were required to take forward their university learning into school, where they taught aspects of the Shakespeare play 'The Tempest' in either Key Stage One or Two. The module presented the challenges of: teaching Shakespeare, a demanding topic to this young age group; employing creative approaches to do this; and using the play to teach children about racial and ethnic diversity and identity. The paper argues that while these challenges exposed a desire to develop creative approaches, the students displayed an uncertainty and lack of confidence in using these approaches to teach about issues of ethnicity. The paper also asserts that an awareness of and desire by teacher educators, to support and educate students about these issues, is crucial.

Keywords: cultural disawareness; racial and ethnic diversity; identity; creativity; active teaching approaches;

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Introduction

The teaching of Shakespeare in schools raises issues over the efficacy of teaching older literature which encompasses language, customs and values that seem to have little relevance in the 21st Century. The teaching of Shakespeare in primary schools raises further issues about introducing young children to adult themes such as nationalism, racism and sexism, all themes within his plays; the problem of creating a pedagogy which recognises the value of teaching classic texts; and a practice which tackles the archaic language and universal topics within the plays, such as love, jealousy and revenge.

Such live and vigorous issues lie behind this small-scale study which will argue that teaching Shakespeare to primary children can help them explore and situate everyday issues in their own reality and experience. It will explore how the use of creative, dramatic and active approaches are a key way to teach Shakespeare for this age, but it will also specifically reference the way Shakespeare can be used to explore the difficult issue of racial and ethnic diversity and identity. While much has been written about bringing Shakespeare into the Primary classroom (Bottoms, 2000; Carter, 2002; DCSF, 2008) much less attention has been devoted to this latter area.

Importantly, this study has a second and parallel focus: understanding how student teachers on a Primary Initial Teacher Education course, engaged in developing a pedagogy, surrounding the teaching of Shakespeare and aimed at developing their personal understanding and awareness of racial diversity and identity issues in education. The use of Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* was the focus for the students because it includes themes of racism, identity and social inequality.

This paper draws on these considerations and asks: How far do student teachers feel confident in using Shakespeare to teach primary children about racial and ethnic diversity and identity? The aims are to:

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- extend understanding of how creative and innovative teaching can support effective teaching of older, classic literature in the primary classroom;
- explore the notion of Shakespeare as a site for teaching children about racial and cultural identity and diversity;
- critically examine student teachers' responses when they engage with issues of racial identity and diversity in their practice.

Background to the Study

This study builds on earlier research with white student teachers' (Warner, 2010) who displayed a lack of awareness and recognition of children's racial and ethnic cultures. They believed it was right and equitable to not 'make an issue' of a child's ethnicity because it would be unfair on the child and other children in a class. They openly pursued a 'colour-blind' approach which according to Gaine (2005), not only fails to acknowledge colour, culture and ethnicity, but an uncertainty about how to notice it. This is supported by Pearce (2005) who identifies teachers' reluctance to 'see' incidents as racist.

Conversely these students also expressed views supporting racial equity and recounted stories of school placements where they were aware of shortcomings on the curriculum and in staff attitudes. However, this apparent discourse of equality is problematic because of underlying assumptions, which do not: acknowledge their powerful position within the white UK majority; recognise the social disadvantage of children from minority ethnic groups; or understand the importance of explicitly educating for racial understanding. They can remain unchallenged, allowing them to feel they are being anti-racist and supportive of minority ethnic children (King, 2004 & Allard and Santoro, 2007).

The students in the study, for this paper were third-year undergraduate English specialists. All were White-British, except for one, of Indian Muslim heritage. They took part in a day-long theatre workshop, led by a specialist company; and university sessions which introduced the idea of creative and active teaching methods, challenged them to examine their own attitudes towards racial and diversity issues in

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teaching and enabled them to reflect on how these attitudes would impact their developing practice.

Review of the Literature

This review of the literature, responds to the research 'Aims', cited above, and will draw on three areas to create an understanding of aligning creative Shakespeare teaching to children's development of racial and ethnic identity and diversity. They are: the rationale of and using active approaches for teaching Shakespeare in the Primary classroom; the concept of creativity with particular reference to the implications for Initial Teacher Education (ITE); and the requirements and practice of teaching for and learning about racial and ethnic understanding and diversity.

Teaching Shakespeare in the primary classroom

Exploring Shakespeare in the Primary school enables children to engage with themes, characters and situations which are true to everyday life. These include love, greed, jealousy and generosity. In addition, teachers can draw on the narrative storytelling potential of Shakespeare to undergird much of the teaching and learning. Meek asserts that the power of story is part of our human heritage, revealing and reflecting ourselves. This 'universal habit' not only unites and binds us but also transmits values and truths and is present in all discourses (1991:103-4). Carter adds that stories allow the imagination freedom to explore ideas and to 'speculate and wonder' (2000:8) and through them, children can gain access to deeper learning through complex plots, varying characterisation and higher-level figurative language.

The process of reading a story involves not only the text but the reader, who structures and restructures what they read to make meaning (Iser, 1978) or as Meek (2001) purports, redraw boundaries to fit their experience and take them beyond what is familiar. Stories, she asserts, have the power to de-stabilise what she terms an 'ethno-centrism' and move children into a wider world. Naidoo offers a powerful supporting argument, suggesting that literature can 'carry human voices across time,

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place experience, society and culture...[providing] deep currents in their society' (1992:16).

Stories are not neutral however and contain significant cultural 'baggage'. If Meek's (1991) point is to be considered, they are vehicles for teaching about and continuing the beliefs and ways of living that a culture believes to be important. Teaching older works, such as Shakespeare, poses questions about what 'hidden' values are being taught and what cultural capital is being expended. Gamble (online) raises further queries about whose heritage is being conveyed in classic literature, which if applied to Shakespeare, epitomises enduring national qualities at best, but English (whiteness) superiority over black and foreign 'others', at worst. Both Gamble and Watson (2000) suggest that adult preoccupations with children reading 'classic' works eclipses the worthiness of others such as multicultural and electronic texts. Despite these 'heritage' and national importance labels, it is pertinent to examine the pedagogical 'drivers' to Shakespeare's place in the Primary curriculum.

The National Curriculum (DfEE, 1999) requires the study of a range of Literature at KS2 and the reading of challenging texts at KS1, while the Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) envisions a universal cultural entitlement for all children and young people (The Children's Plan). Its *Shakespeare for All Ages and Stages* (DCSF, 2008) outlines a model of teaching from KS1 – 4, strongly indicating the notion of Shakespeare, as part of our national and cultural heritage. The initiative advocates that KS1 children should be introduced to Shakespeare through story time and role play and at KS2 they should learn about plot, characters and the language by reading and performing abridged versions of the plays. The Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) and the Shakespeare 4 Kidz organisation aims to draw children in from a young age in an inclusive and sensory approach. They advocate that children 'become co-owners and doers' in the process by proposing a three-fold approach: 'Do It on Your Feet, See it Live, Start it Earlier' (Online, 2008).

Perspectives on the value of teaching Shakespeare include Carter (2000) who proposes that it offers a model and an outlet for children's feelings and provides

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windows into the adult world, about which they are curious. As a classic Carter (2000) and Gamble (Online) contend that Shakespeare contains truths about people and the world, is innovative, open to re-interpretation, lyrical, and has timeless relevance. However, Watson (2000) argues that his classic status in schools can eclipse other high-quality texts on the curriculum and teaching Shakespeare should involve replacing the 'greatness' label with putting learning needs first. A 'playing with the text' approach (Bottoms, 1991; Carter, 2002) allows children explore, discover, enjoy and re-create, but Irish (2008) found that teachers were often afraid to take risks, such as using drama approaches, because of the fear of losing control.

Creativity – definitions and implications for student teachers

Craft (2000) defines creativity as 'possibility thinking' and insight, suggesting non-standard, oblique responses, involving imagination, questioning and playing with an idea. A product-focused view is embodied in this now well-known definition of creativity, as an 'imaginative activity fashioned so as to produce outcomes that are both original and of value' (NACCCE, 1999:30). This is supported by its view that creative education develops potential and increases capacity for ideas and actions. Copping & Howlett (2008) add that the freedom and innovation within creative teaching promotes inclusion and motivation in learning. This has implications for the research question of this paper which seeks to examine ways of supporting children's understanding of their identity and racial diversity in and around their communities.

Curricular prescription and over-regulation within ITE reduces creativity among student teachers (Alexander, 2009; Craft, 2003), directing their focus onto achieving standards and benchmarks. Davies observes that student teachers need to be supported to undergo 'a fundamental shift in attitude or self-belief' (1999:11) which involves taking risks; and Wyse and Jones (2004) suggest this involves developing pedagogy which encourages questioning and organising a variety of responses to learning. They also need to be given the time to identify creative aspects of their own learning, apply it to their practice and then be supported in critically deconstructing the process (Barnes & Scoffham (2007).

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Teaching and learning for understanding racial diversity and difference

The white student teachers surveyed and interviewed for the research cited earlier (Warner, 2010), were asked questions about types of books they would use in the classroom. A large majority, 96%, chose books with only white characters. The reasons offered were: no childhood memories of reading books with black characters; teenage and adult reading which did not include black characters, such as fantasy; a lack of knowledge of other cultures leading to an under-confidence in choosing appropriate multicultural texts. From such responses I developed a concept of 'cultural disawareness':

a state in which people do not discern or engage with issues of racial diversity...not necessarily conscious or calculated but occurring automatically in a preconditioned manner. (Warner, 2010:41).

This seemingly vacant space of racial and ethnic awareness among these student teachers has significant implications for teacher educators. The DCSF (2007c) identified a lack of training in diversity and citizenship issues in ITE and proposed a firmer agenda for diversity education in the curriculum. This included children learning about and understanding difference and multiple identities in UK society and teaching to 'address issues of disparity, commonality and how we live together' (2007c:18). This vision, of nurturing open-minded and constructive citizens of the future, is what some theorists understand as moving towards a more affirmative, multicultural society (Parekh, 2004; Modood, 2004). In addition, the community cohesion agenda (Cantle, 2001) promoted community and neighbourhood action to advance knowledge and awareness of valuing of self and others. Schools are required to explicitly teach and endorse these values (DCSF, 2007b).

The drivers for this agenda seem strong, but there is the danger of stereotyping and reductionism, whereby educators only see minority ethnic children as disaffected and in need of help; or prefer to underplay issues of race and ethnicity believing it unfairly

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excludes some children. This outlook is highlighted in the *Curriculum Review: Diversity and Citizenship* report which understands 'issues of disparity and commonality' (DCSF, 2007c:18) to include white, indigenous children, including socially-deprived boys. It states that this group are often made invisible by the emphasis on minority cultures and recommends that inclusive teaching should, among other things, 'enable [all] pupils to examine issues of cultural identity, challenge stereotypes and think critically' (DCSF, 2007c:50). The danger remains however that schools hide behind the broad and safe term of 'inclusion' enabling them to avoid specific teaching about racial and ethnic issues.

Drawing on the issues presented in this literature review the ensuing presentation and analysis of the data, will explore how student teachers engage with Shakespeare to address issues of racial identity and understanding among children within a creative teaching and learning approach.

Methodology & data-collection methods

The study followed principles of educational research, enabling me to illuminate and critique an aspect of my practice (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002 & Wellington, 2000). The notion of the engaged and immersed 'practitioner researcher' (Dadds & Hartt, 2001) provided a particular grounding for this study because it proposes that any professional change is formed out of new and intelligent understandings. Through its contextualised nature, this type of research enables educators feel their way, in the process, by adapting to situations and people. The concept is developed by Somekh (2006) who suggests that examination and transformation of practice should also empower participants. In this study the students' own practice, alongside my own, is a focus for transformation, because as Twiselton (2007) notes, student teachers are in particular danger of being subsumed into a limited, technical skills approach to teaching, unless they are supported in developing 'interconnected understandings' between subject, pedagogical and contextual knowledge, to inform professional action. The development of this broad and deep understanding, she argues, relies on ITE providing a 'coherent conceptual network'.

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I used this idea of a conceptual network in the design of this study, to provide a clear and supportive linking of students' progression, from little or no knowledge of teaching Shakespeare, to teaching a series of lessons, before reflecting on their practice. Data was gathered from three areas: a detailed, qualitative questionnaire, completed by 18 of the 22 students, in stages over a period of three months. I have called these stages 'pre-thinking' about the teaching of Shakespeare, focusing on university sessions and a theatre workshop; 'present-thinking', which occurred while they were teaching it in school; and 'post-thinking' which were their reflections on practice. The second form of data was analysis of their daily and weekly planning, for the school placement. These were created in peer groups, using learning from university sessions, the theatre workshop and wider reading. The final form of data came from comments and discussion in two small-group tutorials, before and after school placement.

Findings

The following findings follow the 'pre, present and post-thinking' organisation of the data collection.

Pre-thinking about the teaching of Shakespeare

All of the students who responded had studied Shakespeare at secondary school, while only two had been introduced to it at Primary school. They had mainly studied the written text although some mentioned more innovative practices such as the use of drama, film and attending a live performance. The textual focus of their studies, which they described as 'dry' and 'difficult', made them feel apprehensive and baffled about teaching it to Primary children. Their reservations centred on believing the language and themes would be too complex, adult and abstract, 'creating a barrier' to understanding and enjoyment. However their 'pre-thinking' responses revealed an awareness of the need to use engaging teaching approaches, adapting the language 'fairly dramatically' and focusing on narrowed perspectives such as the storyline, use of role-play to explore characters' thoughts and actions and links to other curriculum areas, such as art and music, to help the children experience a breadth of understanding. They hoped the project would 'build personal confidence', provide

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'engaging and memorable' teaching ideas; and give 'a better outlook on teaching Shakespeare'.

Present-thinking

Their responses in this section of the questionnaire focused on the theatre workshop. They appreciated the practical ideas which addressed specific textual issues like overcoming the archaic language through word play, improvisation and humour. It also enabled them to see how Shakespeare's use of themes, such as love, envy and evil, could be suitably adapted for primary children. Questions on using Shakespeare to teach about racial and ethnic diversity were positive at this stage, because through the workshop they had enacted and discussed the unequal power relationship between the characters of Prospero and Caliban and differences in their looks and status. They felt these activities gave them ideas about how to give children 'opportunities to discuss important issues', 'develop a mature understanding' and bring the issues 'within their grasp'. Another student commented:

'These issues can be hard to think about for some children and using the play means the children can respond to the issues without feeling under pressure.'

Her placement had been in a multicultural school where she felt it was important for the children to understand about and respect each other's cultures, but she added that she did not think it would be such an issue in a white school because of it being mono-cultural.

Post-thinking

From the questionnaire, their school planning and post-placement tutorials, I found that while the students were generally positive about the idea of using *The Tempest* to teach about racial and ethnic identity and diversity, many of them did not use it to directly teach about the issue. They focused instead on general injustice motives and actions and the effect it has on people. One student used the play as part of PSHE lessons to look at general issues of stereotyping and bullying.

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'...the teacher was very impressed with all the ideas...I also think the children were more motivated to think about the issues as it was something a bit different... My class absolutely loved doing it for PSHE!'

Another student explained that she used this general approach because it *'took the pressure'* off the one Asian-Muslim child in the class.

They cited various reasons why they did not use the play to engage directly with teaching about racial and ethnic identity and diversity. These included the difficulty of broaching the issue with six year-olds, *'it would have been far too challenging for them'*; and worrying that the children would not making links between the play and this issue. One admitted, *'the racial and ethnic issues do not specifically stand out to me when reading this text'*; and another, *'I don't think it is particularly relevant.'*

Nearly all of the students felt their attitudes towards understanding racial and ethnic diversity were mainly unchanged as a result of the module. Their comments included: *'I am already aware that it's a big issue in society;...all have an equal right to be able to live and work together and the way I see it nobody is better than anyone else'*; and *'I have always been open-minded and never had an issue with different cultures, people and ethnic diversity.'*

Only one student planned and explicitly taught about racial and ethnic identity and diversity, using guidance and resources I placed on the virtual learning site.

However, while the others found explicit teaching about the issue difficult, they did recognise its inherent value because *'...[it] addresses children's misconceptions and avoids them reinforcing stereotypes'*. Another stated, *'All children should be treated equally, but differences taken into account.'* There were a few comments indicating a need to be more perceptive and knowledgeable about the issues; *'I have always been accepting of everyone in society but I feel myself wanting to know more about other ethnic groups instead of just knowing what I know;'* and another, *'...before the course I did not think about it as an issue in the classroom, but [I am] increasingly aware of the need to address race and ethnicity.'* The Asian-Muslim student said her

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views had not changed but felt issues about culture and ethnicity, should be discussed in the classroom, *'not be classed as a taboo, however I feel it has to be spoken about in a sensitive and appropriate manner.'*

Discussion

This section will reflect on the data in response to the three aims of study, cited earlier.

The effect, on the students, by undertaking this teaching, has developed their thinking about creative and innovative ways of teaching classic literature (Carter, 2002 & Bottoms, 2000). Their responses demonstrated a desire to make the teaching of Shakespeare engaging and memorable, thus reflecting Craft's (2000) concept of 'possibility' thinking to help learners be imaginative, pose questions and play with ideas; and Copping & Howlett's (2008) idea that freedom and innovation with creative teaching promotes motivation in learning. The students were already aware that children need interactive approaches to ignite their motivation and learning but had not matched this to the teaching of older, classic literature in the primary classroom, which is required by the National Curriculum. Through the theatre workshop they began to understand these creative possibilities including using the plays as stories. The inherent power of storytelling with the intrigue of plot, character and language (Meek, 1991) was used by all of the students to help the children grasp the whole picture and engage in what Carter describes as the ability to 'speculate and wonder' (2000:8). The archaic language worried the students but they understood that by selecting dialogue and using role-play alongside, enabled the 'playing with the text' approach (Bottoms, 1991; Carter, 2002).

The students were less confident and knowledgeable about using Shakespeare as a site for teaching children about racial and cultural identity and diversity. They related finding *The Tempest* an exciting play for children because of its storm at sea, the supernatural activities of the magician Prospero and the unusual character of Caliban, but found it difficult to relate it to issues, concerning ethnicity. In this instance they had not grasped the potential of Shakespeare plays as containing

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truths about people and the world and that these truths are open to discussion and re-interpretation (Gamble, Online). They also demonstrated a lack of awareness of the notion of the power of literature to raise questions about society and the human condition (Meek, 2001; Naidoo, 1992), in particular enabling children to understand the situation of living in a culturally diverse society as the UK. This notion of creative teaching and learning, having a wider, societal value, rather than just at individual level, and that one of its effects is in promoting inclusive thinking and action (NACCCE, 1999 & Copping & Howlett, 2008) was not acknowledged by the students. Their focus was on developing creative approaches to keep the children engaged and interested, rather than using them to provide opportunities to help children understand their own ethnic identities and to engage in the process of understanding each other's backgrounds.

This group of student teachers responded to the issues of racial and ethnic identity and diversity in a number of ways. These ranged from not noticing a need to engage in the issues and focusing instead on general character actions and motives; to side-stepping explicit teaching, preferring to use oblique approaches, such as examining bullying. A few understood the importance of children engaging with racial and ethnic issues but did not focus directly on it. All stated their beliefs in being fair and equitable to all children but there was an absence of comments to indicate an awareness of being part of a white majority and its attendant benefits and privileges; or that minority ethnic children and their families, face continual negative experiences, which in turn affects their outlook and performances at school. Apart from the student who suggested that they would need to become increasingly aware and educated about the need to address race and ethnicity in the classroom, the others did not voice this concern.

Conclusions and implications for the future

The initial research question was: How far do student teachers feel confident in using Shakespeare to teach primary children about racial and ethnic diversity and identity? The data showed that the students developed new skills, learning and enthusiasm for teaching Shakespeare creatively because they are at the stage where they are

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learning how intriguing such approaches can be. Therefore they tended to focus on this aspect of the project. There is little evidence that their understanding of teaching for racial and ethnic identity and diversity had increased from their starting point of believing themselves to be fair and unprejudiced and that all children should be treated equally. There was little realisation that children from minority ethnic groups are socially disadvantaged because of their colour, culture and often, relative poverty; and therefore teaching should address issues of positive identities and promoting ways of living and learning which are equitable.

As a lecturer and researcher I continue to address this notion of 'cultural disawareness' (Warner, 2010) to make the invisible systems and structures in schooling, concerning race and ethnicity, visible to the student teachers with whom I work. I acknowledge Davies' wisdom (1999:11) that student teachers need to be supported to undergo 'a fundamental shift in attitude or self-belief' which involves taking risks. These students chose the risk of transforming their developing pedagogies to begin to incorporate creative teaching. Facing the risk of beginning to teach to promote racial and ethnic identity and diversity, is a new and bigger step to take. It is a delicate topic which involves recognition and understanding of their own ethnicity, their position in society, and the role of schooling. At this stage it may seem too big a step for them, but my role is to enable the students to organise varying learning agendas for their children. It will involve as Wyse and Jones (2004) and Twiselton (2007) identify, helping them negotiate around prescriptive Government curricular agendas, towards developing pedagogy which meets children's needs by organising a variety of responses to learning which promotes confidence in identity and diversity issues.

In development of this Shakespeare module I will need to develop teaching which provides support and feedback (Craft, 2000) to enable them to engage with racial and ethnic identity and diversity issues in their practice. The current pre and post-placement small group tutorials can be developed to help them discuss their thinking, fears and ways forward. In this way they will also be critically deconstructing their learning (Barnes & Scoffham (2007) in a supportive context. I can also critically

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comment on their plans, before school placement, rather than only supporting them as they begin to plan. This may help them achieve more explicit teaching about racial and ethnic diversity and identity issues, alongside the creative approaches. The students would then work with the teacher to refine planning which reflects the needs of the class and any school issues surrounding the topic.

The students found teaching Shakespeare to primary children, through the mode of creativity, interesting and challenging. Through their own learning about interpreting a specific text to raise issues about racial and ethnic identity and diversity, they have begun the process of developing a confidence to teach in a way which helps children take part in life in an understanding and self-confident way and contribute positively to their school and communities.

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