Equality and diversity in secondary schools: teachers' agentic and constrained enactments of the curriculum

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Abstract

In England educators have been concerned about ensuring equality and diversity in education due to ever-diversifying school populations, who find themselves positioned as outsiders to England's National Curriculum. This article explores the accessibility and limitations of the curriculum from the perspective of ten secondary school teachers in nine different subjects in inner city state schools. We begin by examining the participants' goals and aims when enacting the curriculum to make it accessible to all students. However, the prescriptive nature of the curriculum in most subjects makes this task challenging. We then examine how participants perceived that they enabled students' access to the curriculum and the challenges encountered. We focus on art and English to highlight the different spaces to enact equality and diversity within the curriculum. In the nonprescriptive art curriculum, teachers choose their own resources and themes, allowing for greater creativity and cultural inclusivity. In contrast, in the English curriculum, teachers find the process of equalising and diversifying the curriculum difficult, particularly at Key

Stage 4, due to the high status of the subject. To conclude, we argue that the more prescriptive a curriculum subject is, the more difficult it is to make it equal, diverse and inclusive of everyone.

Introduction

There has been a long-standing concern to improve equality and diversity in pedagogy and practice in state secondary schools in England (Gilroy, 1976; Gaine and George, 1999; Gillborn and Mirza, 2000). Since the work of the Inner London Education Authority on race and education in the 1960s, there have been concerted efforts on the part of teachers, academics and parents to make the curriculum in English schools more inclusive. More recently, the passing of the Equality Act in 2010 protected characteristics such as age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion and belief, and sex and sexual orientation. The Act aimed to provide a legislative framework to form the basis of a more equal and inclusive society. State schools in England have responded to the Act in different ways, adjusting the curriculum in relation to their school communities (Ahmed, 2012; Meetoo, 2020). This mixed response has contributed to a varied picture of the provisions that are made for diversity in pedagogy to ensure inclusion of all students throughout an individual school. While some schools have embraced change and diversified their curriculum through ensuring a wide representation of cultural materials, there is evidence that many schools could do more to make their curriculum and pedagogy more inclusive (Meetoo, 2020).

Set against this context, this article addresses the research question: What are the perspectives of secondary school teachers in London about their agentic enactments of the curriculum? We begin the article with an analysis of the experiences of 10 secondary school teachers in England from a range of subject areas to understand their agentic and constrained enactments of the curriculum. We then focus on the subjects of art and English to highlight the very different spaces available to enact equality and diversity within the constraints of the curriculum. The data provide new insights into the mixed picture of enactments among participants, specifically that all participants made time and created space to develop equality and diversity within the curriculum subjects they teach, despite the challenges.

In this article, we view equality as the right of every individual to access the same opportunities, but we also acknowledge recent feminist thinking that has extended and reframed the concept in relation to intersectional equality, where the emphasis is on the 'doing' of equality (Woods et al., 2022) to challenge power hierarchies. The term 'diversity' in pedagogy draws attention to teachers' efforts to diversify their teaching and learning practices to recognise and include all students, regardless of differences in social identity.

Background

In November 1987, the Conservative Party published the National Curriculum Education Bill in England. The bill included three core subjects: mathematics, science and English. Kenneth Baker, the then Secretary of State, was responsible for the bill, and he 'steered it through Parliament despite criticism that the National Curriculum consisted mainly as a subject listing without underlying aims' (Aldrich, 2002: 201). The report from Radical Rights that influenced Kenneth Baker showed that one of the reasons behind the poor industrial performance in England was low standards of competency in English and mathematics. Industrial employers, in particular, were not satisfied with the skills of new employees, owing to a lack of confidence that the majority of people had in the core subjects (Johnson and Millett, 1996).

In 1988, the Education Reform Act set up two curriculum councils and the National Curriculum (DfES, 1988). The curriculum consisted of the three core subjects and an additional seven compulsory 'foundation subjects – history, geography, technology, music, art, physical education and a modern foreign language' (Aldrich, 2002: 201). As Ross (2000: 77) points out, 'the Education Reform Act made it

clear that the National Curriculum, with its ten subjects, was but a part of the "broad and balanced" curriculum that the Act required'. The Education Reform Act confirmed the high status of English, mathematics and science by reaffirming their status as 'core'.

In 1993, Sir Ron Dearing was commissioned to look at the National Curriculum, and to undertake in particular an 'urgent review, with an interim report by July, and final recommendations by December' (Ross, 2000: 79). The review was initiated to look at the rigidity of the curriculum, enabling possible change to take place. After carrying out his review, Dearing 'proposed streamlining of the curriculum which would give greater flexibility to the individual schools and teachers in their planning. This change allowed for more time to be spent on mathematics and English in the early years and the possibility of subject choice and vocational options in the later years' (Bartlett, 2002: 229). The Dearing report could be seen as a re-evaluation of the 'traditional' academic subjects such as English with a view to allowing for future equality of educational opportunities of both an academic and vocational nature.

In 1999, Secretary of State for Education David Blunkett introduced the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies. These strategies were built on the experience of the National Numeracy Project that had been introduced in England between 1996 and 1999. The Literacy and Numeracy Strategies were introduced in primary schools in the form of a designated hour for literacy and numeracy every day, with prescribed content and methods. This initiative raised the status of English once again, this time at primary school level.

The National Curriculum underwent a major review in 2000, when Curriculum 2000 was introduced. One of the major changes of Curriculum 2000 was 'the call for the distinction between core and foundation subjects to be removed' (Bartlett, 2002: 103). However, it is interesting to note that 'the guidance outlining the National Curriculum requirements from 2000 onwards does not appear to take on board any of these recommendations' (Bartlett, 2002: 103). Ross (2000) noted that throughout the evolution of the National Curriculum there has been constant 'conflict' around what should and should not be included, and what the aims and status of the subjects included should be. Within this debate, issues of cultural representations have been a key aspect of the agenda, although with little agreement, due in part to the diversity of the school population in England (Banks et al., 2015).

In 2010, Michael Gove announced intentions to implement the English Baccalaureate (EBacc), which incorporates English, mathematics and science, as well as history, geography and foreign languages (DfE, 2017). The EBacc would be evaluated by standard end-of-year examinations, with no coursework involved. Teachers were also concerned about the absence of creative disciplines such as art and music in the EBacc. Therefore, the EBacc was extensively criticised for its potential to limit the curriculum. Gove's proposal for the EBacc was dropped, but GCSEs have been reformed with a narrower focus on content and examinations (DfE, 2017), similar to the EBacc's original intention. Long (2017: 3) stated in the GCSE, AS and A level briefing paper that 'the reforms are extensive and include changes to both the subject content and assessment of these qualifications, as well as the qualifications that may be studied. The reforms have aimed to increase the rigour of the qualifications, with an increased focus on examinations. As a result of the expanded and more rigorous GCSE content, the National Education Union (NEU, 2018) cautioned that schools are under pressure to teach a narrower curriculum, focusing more on GCSE core subject content, to the detriment of creative subjects such as drama, music and art.

Furthermore, the most recent iteration of the National Curriculum was published in 2013. The document provides the programmes of study for each subject, setting out the content schools must follow (DfE, 2013). Some subjects have more detail than others; for example, English is far more detailed than art. According to the Department for Education (DfE, 2013: 5): 'The school curriculum comprises all learning and other experiences that each school plans for its students. The National Curriculum forms one part of the school curriculum.' In line with the requirements of the 2002 Education Act and 2010 Academies Act, every state-funded school must offer a broad and balanced curriculum. In England, the term 'state-funded schools' refers to schools that are either directly funded and managed by the Secretary of State for Education, often known as Academies, or are maintained by a local authority and are required to follow the National Curriculum (DfE, 2013). Nonetheless, both Academies and Maintained Schools 'must offer a curriculum which is balanced and broadly based and which:

- promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society, and
- prepares pupils at the school for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life.' (DfE, 2013: 5)

As one of the principles of equality and diversity in education, the National Curriculum (DfE, 2013) was introduced to ensure that all students acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in adulthood. However, increased examination pressure and the use of core subjects (English, mathematics and science) examination scores as a measure of school performance leave little room for a 'broad and balanced' curriculum, as schools concentrate increasingly on teaching core subject content.

The most recent challenges to the curriculum have come from the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted, 2019: 3), who altered the inspection framework methodology for schools in 2019 to include a specific focus on the curriculum, using 'the concepts of "intent", "implementation" and "impact" to recognise that the curriculum passes through different states: it is conceived, taught and experienced' and 'the end result of a good, well-taught curriculum is that students know more and are able to do more'. It is not clear from the document the exact skills and knowledge that students will gain to be able to do more.

More recently, and partly in response to the Black Lives Matter movement, there has been a curriculum review series for languages. The review has suggested that language should 'encourage pupils to appreciate and celebrate differences' (Ofsted, 2021: 1), which explicates the different characteristics protected by the Equality Act 2010. However, the way that these are implemented in the classroom varies considerably from one subject to another, and from one teacher to another (Meetoo, 2020). In this article, we explore challenges and barriers related to students' attempts to access the National Curriculum, and teachers' perception of limitations of the curriculum. We then examine two school subjects, English and art, to show the difference in the enactment of the equality and diversity agenda among our participants.

Equality and diversity

According to Janmaat (2012), England's policies on diversity, such as the Race Relations Act 1976 and Amendment 2000, the Equality Act 2006 and 2010 and most recently the Diversity and Inclusion Strategy 2018, are predisposed to respect, acknowledge and distinguish every ethnic community. These policies are embedded in the education system in England, and their enactment might presuppose a high degree of equality between different ethnic groups (Gundara, 2000). However, different school structures (Academies, religious, grammar), and the emphasis in these different schools (academic, vocational and skills), result in different enactments of equality and diversity.

One important strand informing the enactment of equality and diversity in education is through the concept of 'multicultural education', which refers 'to any form of education or teaching that incorporates the histories, texts, values, beliefs and perspectives of people from different cultural backgrounds' (Abbott, 2014: 1). For example, in the classroom, teachers may adapt their teaching to include the study of students' background and characteristics. This form of education promotes and supports the recent policy efforts to decolonise the curriculum, which is a component of multicultural education. Decolonising the curriculum refers to attempts to 'situate the histories and knowledges that do not originate from the West in the context of imperialism, colonialism and power and to consider why these have been marginalised and decentred' (Arshad, 2021: 1). A key component of providing a decolonised, multicultural education is to adapt and restructure the curriculum content to reflect students' diversity (Banks et al., 2015). Other aspects of multicultural education include: the knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, an equity pedagogy, and an empowering school culture and social structure that are all integral parts of a truly inclusive education, according to Banks et al. (2015). In our project, we explore teachers' agency, which is the capacity to act, in relation to 'the extent to which teachers use examples and content from a variety of cultures in their teaching' (Banks et al., 2015: 55) to support the provision of multicultural education in their classrooms. In this article, we follow the perspective set out by Priestley et al. (2015: 2), who note that 'agency is not something that people can have; it is something that people do or, more precisely, something they achieve'. They argue for an ecological, temporal perspective of agency as a way of understanding the cultural and structural conditions that make agentic enactments possible.

Theoretical framework

We used policy enactment theory to analyse the data (Ball et al., 2012). Policy enactment theory refers to the principles in which policies are not just implemented by schools, but also the different stages of interpretation, translation and enactment they go through as they are implemented in practice. Interpretation and translations are typically a matter for school leaders, heads of year and subject specialists (Ball et al., 2011). Enactments tend to happen in the classroom, and they reflect teachers' attempts to put policy into their teaching and learning practices:

> Policy is complexly encoded in sets of texts and various documents, and it is also decoded in complex ways. Policy enactment involves creative processes of interpretation and translation, that is, the recontextualisation through reading, writing and talking of the abstractions of policy ideas into contextualised practices. (Braun et al., 2011: 587)

We recognise that the educational setting and the demographic of participants will influence the enactment of policy. A policy will be differently enacted in practice according to the time, place and social actors who enact it. Indeed, while policies may place some limits on teachers' practices, the enactment process may enable them to be creative and to take on new opportunities (Ball, 2021). Furthermore, in this article, we draw on the concept to understand teachers' agentic and constrained enactments of a culturally inclusive curriculum. Since no specific policy on decolonising the curriculum yet exists for Key Stages 3 and 4 (which students must complete in English state secondary aged 11–13 and 14–16), the policy framework used in this article draws on the current National Curriculum, which aims to respond to students' needs to overcome 'potential barriers for individuals and groups of pupils' under the section of inclusion (DfE, 2013: 9).

We now outline the methodology and methods used in our study.

Methodology

This article aims to explore and understand school teachers' agentic enactments within the subjects of English, mathematics, history, art, Spanish and French. We conducted qualitative research with secondary school teachers in London. We carried out in-depth semi-structured interviews underpinned by a commitment to 'listen, empathise and try to understand' (Thomas, 1998: 145). We interviewed ten practitioners, comprising one head teacher, one deputy head teacher, one assistant head teacher, three heads of departments and six teachers with other responsibilities or none (see Table 1). Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling technique, and data collection was carried out by one of the authors (Lebbakhar), a practising secondary school teacher who utilised her professional contacts to reach out to potential participants. With the exception of Catarina, none of the participants had a personal or professional connection to the author. As a consequence of snowball sampling, only secondary school teachers in the London region volunteered to take part in this study.

In the interviews, practitioners were invited to share their perceptions and experiences of equality and diversity in school and, more specifically, in their subject specialism. The interviews took place remotely using Zoom or WhatsApp digital platforms. The interviews, which lasted 24 to 43 minutes, were digitally recorded and manually transcribed. Furthermore, to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2013) six-phase method of theme analysis. Thematic analysis is a widely adaptable method (Mohajan, 2018) which can be tailored to the needs of any research project. It is also thought to help provide structure to the analysis process in order to understand participants' perspectives and experiences (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). As a result, the theme of 'curriculum enactment' emerged as one of the strongest in the data. Within this theme, evidence of teachers' agentic enactment of the curriculum was found in their classroom teaching practice when altering and adjusting the curriculum in response to meet the diversity needs of their students.

Table 1. Participant demographic information (Source: Authors, 2022)

Participant pseudonyms	Age band	Gender	Years of teaching experience	Subject specialism (secondary phases)	Type of school	Other position/ responsibility
Elisa	40–45	Female	19	Sociology	Academy	Deputy head teacher
Ahmed	30–35	Male	3	ICT	Academy	None
Ziyad	50–55	Male	30	History	Academy	None
Mohamed	30–35	Male	6	Mathematics	Academy – recent converter	Most able lead
Robert	30	Male	6	English	Academy	Literacy coordinator
Anne	60	Female	17	English and Drama	Academy	Head of department
Iljana	54	Female	32	Science	Christian Orthodox School (Academy – MAT)	Head teacher
Catarina	40	Female	6	MFL	Academy	None
Lena	42	Female	16	Art	Academy	Assistant deputy head teacher
Hussein	45–50	Male	15	English	Academy	none

This research observed the ethical guidelines set out by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018), and it was approved by Brunel University London prior to data collection. All participants signed a consent form before the interview was conducted which stated the right of participants to withdraw at any time during the research process and to refuse to answer any question during the interview. Additionally, pseudonyms were given to each participant, and any identifying information was anonymised.

Findings

Enabling access to the curriculum: the main challenge

A key aim of this research was to understand how teachers facilitate access to the curriculum through policies and practices that are inclusive for all students, contributing to equal and equitable opportunities to take full advantage of their education. The key challenge facing the teachers was how much they could deviate from government policy expectations of curriculum delivery to enable all students to access the curriculum. They all highlighted the importance of access, and the perspectives shared were expressed well by Catarina, a language teacher, who explained that:

> Equality, and diversity, is about making sure that every single student accesses the curriculum fully. They might not access it in the same way, but as long as they can access it, benefit from it, making sure that all students, whether they're from different ethnic minorities or religion, if they have disability ... to ensure the curriculum is made accessible for all of them.

Catarina highlights the importance of access to ensure equality and diversity for all students. Traditionally, the curriculum was designed with the assumption that students' academic abilities are mainly cognitive (Hallinan, 2001), and that everyone is subject to the same process to assess their intelligence, regardless

of their characteristics. However, today, with the Department for Education (DfE) emphasising 'meeting the needs of all children' (Ofsted, 2019) in all educational settings, and the Equality Act 2010 directing attention to particular protected characteristics in schools, teachers seem more aware of the importance of removing obstacles for students and facilitating access to the standardised curriculum.

Catarina's perspective was echoed by Ahmed, who gave an example of characteristics (English as an Additional Language, or EAL), stating that: 'EAL students are good, we have 90 per cent of them. It's very important that we understand the culture, understand the religion, understand a lot about them so that … they also have access to the curriculum.' Ahmed states the importance of 'understanding' different aspects of students' identities, and how these influence students. To gain this understanding, Ahmed explained that he might 'create a task, which is understandable to them, but still covering the topic'. Ahmed's view highlights that when teachers know and understand the backgrounds and needs of their students, they can better adapt the curriculum, and therefore facilitate accessibility to the teaching and learning material. This statement provides a useful example of a teacher's efforts to achieve equality and diversity in education by making the curriculum accessible for all. As Ahmed suggests, the knowledge and understanding of the students held by the teacher can play a key role in curriculum adaptations to ensure that it is accessible to all. However, as this example highlights, efforts to provide a culturally inclusive curriculum are at the discretion of the teacher, and rely on them having the expertise and experience to facilitate accessibility for their students.

Perceived limitations of the curriculum content

All teachers interviewed in this research seemed to have a strong commitment to addressing equality and diversity issues in their teaching enactments of the policy. They recognised the importance of adapting the curriculum to meet the diversity of their students. However, teachers' commitment alone does not guarantee its application in the classroom. Hussein said that: 'What's required for the children to learn, again, is very descriptive and limited. And because of the way content is, because there is certain literature that mainstream education system values, it also limits the one that teachers can do.'

Our data confirmed that all of the teachers we interviewed are committed to adapting the curriculum, but the prescriptive nature of the curriculum restricts teachers' agency considerably in making the change. Ziyad echoed Hussein, saying that 'the curriculum content restricts the teachers to follow certain materials'. Even if the curriculum at Key Stage 3 is more flexible than at Key Stage 4, and allows space for more inclusive resources and content to be taught, teachers sometimes struggle to surpass its prescriptive nature. This struggle limits the enactments they can offer in their classrooms; however, subject differences disrupt this, as discussed below in reference to the art curriculum (Braun et al., 2011).

Robert's emphasis on the curriculum being prescribed by the government constrains teachers' agency in their efforts to provide adaptations of the curriculum to make it more relevant to their student cohorts:

> If you work within a system that is directed from the top and in some ways, the people who've set the national curriculum, have different agendas and different beliefs. And I think it's interesting right now and the recent things in the news about how as teachers, we are being limited in what are the different things we can explore and teach in our classrooms.

The data show that there is a consensus among our participants, drawn from different subject areas, that the curriculum can be adapted to include diverse resources, however, only to a certain extent. The prescription of the curriculum content coming from the government is a barrier to providing an equal, diverse and inclusive curriculum. The teachers in our sample did not perceive that they had the space within their subject area to enact their agency fully to ensure an inclusive experience for all children, as this would require them to make a change or adaptation to a government policy. Because the curriculum is so detailed in all core subjects and most others, there is limited space for creativity and adaptation in the content presented to students.

The English curriculum

In what follows, we focus on teachers' pedagogical strategies in English, and teachers' agency in their enactments of equality and diversity in relation to the English curriculum to show how constrained their efforts were, particularly at Key Stage 4.

Not surprisingly, when English teachers talked about the curriculum, the majority echoed Elisa's view: 'The curriculum is all very middle class and a bit old and little bit misogynistic, if I'm brutally honest, it's taught from the point of view of middle-class White men really.'

However, there is evidence from the teachers we spoke to that they are willing to adapt the curriculum, if at all possible. A frequent strategy is to apply adapted and culturally relevant resources and materials to attract students' attention and sustain their interest in the classroom. As Hussein explained:

> One of the things that we do is trying to use materials especially in English language, materials that cater to the different cultures, that talk about the different things. So, the material is a very important element in terms of the diversity, as something that reflects this [diversity] as much as we can.

Specifically, talking about the importance of materials used in the subject of English, to reflect the diversity of his students, Hussein clearly defines one of the five dimensions within multicultural education: content integration. Banks et al. (2015: 56) describe content integration as: 'the extent in which teachers use examples, data and information from various cultures and groups to illustrate key concepts, principles, generalisation and theories in their subject areas' to enhance students' engagement. The aim of decolonising the curriculum is to provide a more inclusive educational environment by adapting the materials so that students can identify with what is being taught.

Teachers aim to use diverse materials in their teaching to offer students the opportunity to identify with the curriculum. Robert noted that:

> In my department we currently, we're actually working to make it more inclusive. ... We're gonna be looking at texts from around the world ... And those students, I think, need to read texts that maybe ... don't necessarily directly speak to their cultures, but at least show them different cultures, right? And some of them might recognise their culture in those texts.

When talking about English teachers in her school, Iljana (head teacher) said that 'they're using themes that are going to appeal to children' to reinforce the notion of students' interest and identification with the curriculum. However, as Hussein said, 'material wise, you can diversify the curriculum, but also become inclusive in relation to that'. Therefore, the choice of materials is only part of the curriculum reform process (Banks et al., 2015). Although content integration is necessary, it cannot lead to a fully inclusive curriculum if applied on its own.

We also note that all the teachers expressed agency to adapt the curriculum, and that this happened in lower year groups, which are years 7–9 at Key Stage 3 (DfE, 2013). Iljana, a head teacher, confirms that 'in English, they've focused on Key Stage 3'. Robert states that it is their aim 'to achieve a kind of international curriculum for Key Stage 3', adding that his department is currently changing 'the unit of work for Year 9, and we're gonna be looking at texts from around the world'. Anne explains that in her department: 'We put in our diversity, we can put it in poetry, we can put in readings from other cultures and ideas, which is good, you know, we try and fill that gap in the lower years.'

Mariam reiterated what Anne said about the types of adaptations possible in Key Stage 3, telling us that 'we changed our curriculum at Key Stage 3. So yeah, 7 and 8. So that we could explore more diverse writers, more diverse poetry.' The data illustrate that teachers are keen on the processes of both diversifying and decolonising the curriculum; however, their agency can only be exercised where they have more control and flexibility over the curriculum. As Key Stage 3 is not formally or externally assessed, it seems that the teachers have exercised their agency more easily up to Key Stage 3 only. As Robert explained: 'But then, when you get to the higher levels, you've got to, really, make sure you're including the, focusing much more on whether it's aiming to the GCSEs.'

GCSE and A level assessment papers are written in accordance with the curriculum, therefore national examinations 'drive instruction and define which elements of the curriculum are emphasised' (Isaacs, 2014: 131). Hussein concurs with the statement made by Robert, adding that:

> The way the curriculum is designed, and the way the education system works. Almost, there's almost no room for inclusive, for an agenda of inclusive curriculum, if you like. So, anything other than, you know, anything other than something that contributes to the end, to the assessment, to the outcome of the children, is pointless. That is the performativity culture!

The pressure exerted by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation does not allow some teachers to risk adapting or changing the curriculum at examination levels. Teachers recognise the lack of time in the profession, and they often worry that the time should be spent on what is going to be assessed, and since the examinations are based on the curriculum, teachers prefer to stick to it. As Mohamed said:

> 'I'm happy to discuss it, let's say in terms of PSHE [personal, social, health and economic education], but not so much in my own subject, unless it's part of the curriculum because you have to make sure that that time is dedicated to them passing the exams.'

This explains the lack of diversity in the curriculum, which links to the narrow exams-based focus, and arguably reinforces the view that 'if you can't test it, don't teach it' (Mohamed). Of course, this view is going against the current and up-to-date Education Inspection Framework, which intends to be a force for improvement for all learners in England. The framework and remit-specific criteria are clear that the expectation is that all learners will receive a high-quality, ambitious education. While all teachers embraced the opportunity to diversity the curriculum in order to include engaging cultural resources, few of them are ready to risk deviating from the programme of study for examination classes in their enactments (Braun et al., 2011). The one exception to this is the art teachers.

The art curriculum

The most recent art curriculum was published in September 2013 and is very short on detail (DfE, 2013). A key reason for this is that the curriculum is mainly skills based. Out of five objectives, only one is content based: 'about the history of art, craft, design and architecture, including periods, styles and major movements from ancient times up to the present day' (DfE, 2013: 1). This broad statement allows great flexibility for art teachers. The other four objectives consist of developing a range of techniques, using a range of media and materials, and developing students' analysing and evaluating skills. Lena explained that:

> Because our curriculum actually is very short. I think it's not a page long. And it's very open to how you'd like to do it as a school, as a teacher. It's very useful, actually, the art curriculum, it just says that students have to explore a variety of different media, that's that, and a variety of different genres and periods. That's that.

Iljana illustrates the ways in which teachers are willing to develop students' skills using a variety of themes to make the subject attractive and engaging for their students:

> OK, this is the national curriculum for art, but actually, for our community and our context, we want them to learn more about this type of thing, as well as the other stuff, you know, we want them to do different types of art that will appeal to some of their backgrounds and some of the colours and the visual imagery that the children and their families have grown up with.

A sense of identification is intended in the choice of themes, as Iljana wants not only the students to identify with what is being taught, but also the subject to be appealing. This perspective is echoed by Lena, who explained that:

> Some students who may follow Islam, if you start bringing Islamic tiles and patterns into your lessons that are very, again, these are patterns which they see around the houses they see around their religious places. So they feel attached and unique and feel that kind of connection within what you're trying to teach them. And they feel proud of the outcome, because they really do feel that they have a link in there, and they've got an identity with a piece of work, it is theirs, is unique to them.

The teachers employ examples and content from a variety of cultures and groups to highlight essential concepts, generalisations and issues within their subject areas, which is referred to as content integration (Banks et al., 2015). Similarly, Lena is trying to create links between the theme and the attachment, which enable students to identify with the lesson. When asked how she creates the connection, Lena replied:

> So, we would, for example, you would have, they're bringing their genre, the genres which they're living in, or which they like into the classroom. So, if we're looking at, if we're working with your people, and within a project on, I don't know, God said, you're bringing in the as we've got a huge Yale Indian community, you're bringing in the Asian gods, you're looking at many patterns, you're looking at their culture, and you're teaching them their culture, which makes the buying much easier. So, their involvement would be much more, they're still connected to the lesson, they'll feel important, and then they will kind of join in.

Adding to the connection feature within lessons, Lena adds that the aim of creating such content which students can connect to, is to enhance students' engagement. Student engagement theory is a teaching and learning framework where students are engaged with their learning through meaningful and worthwhile tasks (Kuh, 2010). The foundation of engagement theory is to 'optimize the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students and the performance' (Kuh, 2010: 3); therefore, we can conclude that the aim of diversifying and decolonising the curriculum similarly is to enhance students' achievements.

Unlike in English, the art curriculum is often praised by teachers, who describe it as short and very flexible. No description of the art curriculum as being Eurocentric or old has been found in the data. Quite the contrary, it is said to be open to adaptation and creativity. For example, Lena explained:

> Our curriculum is really, the national curriculum for the arts, it's actually really good, I wouldn't. I wouldn't kind of knock it, simply because it just gives so much opportunities for adaptation for creativity, for the teachers own specialism to kind of shine through for us to explore resources that we can easily get. Yeah, to make it a much more kind of individualised and, and do useful projects for the community.

Being able to adapt the curriculum at teachers' discretion, and to create these connections between students and resources, seems to be key in the process of diversifying and decolonising the curriculum. When Lena was asked how the process of adaptation would look in her subject, she said:

> Because the themes are so open to so many different explorations, and you can take the themes and different directions, that again, I do think there is a lot of areas for the students to really kind of show off their skills. They can use photography, paint, 3Ds, ceramics printing, they've got all these different media, they can express the things in, and I think it's really powerful. So, a really powerful journey to undertake is that whole kind of GCSE and A level examination of theme development.

Another interesting point that was mentioned in the last quotation is that Key Stages and examinations are not an obstacle for the process. Stating that the process goes all the way up to GCSE (Key Stage 4) and eventually A level (Key Stage 5), Lena explained that they are taking the theme studied up to examination level, themes that have been chosen by the teachers for their students. This leaves us to assume that examinations are constructed to accommodate any theme, because indeed it is skill based. Even if the examination themes for GCSE and A level art are set by the exam boards, they allow for a significant amount of flexibility in the focus and development of the ideas in the classroom.

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored teachers' agentic enactment of the curriculum in an attempt to deliver a more inclusive curriculum. We have looked at the accessibility and limitations of the curriculum, and then we took a close look at the English and art curricula in particular. Teachers recognised the need to ensure accessibility for all students, and therefore knowing students' background is the basis for tailoring the curriculum to the diversity of their classrooms in a bid to improve equality and diversity in education. All teachers in our research indicated their awareness of diversifying the curriculum and were also taking steps to decolonise the curriculum through adapting resources to make them more inclusive to the students' identities in an effort to enhance students' engagement.

The perceived limitation of the curriculum relates to restricting teachers' agency in the choice of texts and resources they deploy. Moreover, the curriculum is a government policy, so some teachers may not feel confident to marginalise some content and include more diverse materials. This raises the

issue of teachers' opportunity to exercise agency to make adaptations to the curriculum, which could be explored in further studies.

The English teachers all illustrated the ways in which they were flexible in their use of the resources and materials used at Key Stage 3, while the art teachers were able to provide several ways in which they adapted the curriculum all the way to Key Stage 5. The key underpinning difference was the volume of prescription between the curriculum in these two subjects.

In English, we found that adapting the curriculum was a rather challenging task for teachers. While some teachers were very reluctant to change the curriculum at Key Stage 4 and Key Stage 5, where national examinations take place, most teachers have made changes at Key Stage 3. The extent to which teachers can implement these modifications appears to be significantly constrained by national examinations. In this instance, teachers are hesitant to deviate from the curriculum because they must prepare their students for the examination. Consequently, unless the exam changes, the curriculum cannot be made fully inclusive. However, when teachers were able to, those changes were mainly content focused, selecting materials from diverse sources to reflect the diversity of their students in order to enhance students' engagement. This also means that teachers can remove some materials that may be irrelevant to the students. The main limitation of the curriculum in English expressed by teachers was the volume of prescription, which left little space for teachers to select a more diverse range of materials. The discussion of the English curriculum raises some issues about the extent of teachers' agency in adapting the curriculum, and their willingness and ability to teach diverse materials and access appropriate resources.

A key finding of our research is the implications of different subject's curricula for improving equality and diversity in teaching and learning in English state secondary schools. The data confirm that art provides a creative space for teachers and students to explore and examine materials relevant to their cultural backgrounds and heritage. Part of this creativity is due to the nonprescriptive nature of the art curriculum; it is two pages, compared to English, which is twenty-five pages. In art, the curriculum has been described as short and mainly skill based. These are the two advantages of the art curriculum. Because it is not so detailed, it leaves more room for teachers to navigate around different themes that reflect students' identity or cultural background. One of the main arguments found in art is that students must identify with what is being taught to enhance students' engagement and attainment. The curriculum being mostly skills based can create space for teachers to explore a wide range of materials and resources. In art, we found no criticism of the curriculum, nor a suggestion to improve it. One of the main concerns found in this research is that teachers seem to be operating on a try and fail basis. How diverse resources are selected, which of the content is removed and therefore replaced, is at the teachers' discretion. However, we can often sense hesitations and perhaps a lack of confidence in their experience of enacting the curriculum. We often find key phrases such as 'we try to... ', 'we can do... ', 'we could... '. The teachers are all willing to do what they can to enhance students' accessibility, engagement and, eventually, attainment. They are indeed trying to enact a more equal and diverse curriculum for their students.

This study suggests further research into teachers' expertise and ability in selecting resources to ensure equality, diversity and inclusion for all. Additionally, it suggests investigating the factors that influence teachers' resource selection.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The authors declare that research ethics approval for this research was provided by Brunel University London ethics committee.

Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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