Cultural Diversity as a Resource for Design

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Abstract
Cultural diversity is an integral part of the current British society. Learning about the modern multi-cultural Britain is important within school curriculum in England both at Primary and Secondary level. This paper presents personal accounts recorded through a process of observation, discussion and interaction with school heads, teachers and students on the manifestation of cultural diversity within and outside their learning environment. This paper also identifies the role of families and their participation within schools alongside identifying challenges in the current way of working of how cultural diversity is addressed and acknowledged by schools and students. Through this paper the author would like to present the possibility to explore and use cultural diversity as a resource to inform and influence design within HCI.

Author Keywords
Cultural diversity; design; social and emotional wellbeing

Introduction
Schools in the UK have a statutory requirement to follow the guidelines laid down by OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills)
whilst developing and delivering curriculum in their schools. The pluralist British society has helped the education system to encourage the notions of diversity and equality from a very young age within curriculum areas such as SMSC (Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural), RE (Religious Education) and Citizenship Education. Cultural diversity is thus promoted in schools to address both the statutory need and the societal need to ensure students understand and learn inter-cultural cohesion. [10]

Significant research has been undertaken in the field of HCI looking linking cultural diversity and education. Some research are looking at integrating cultural diversity in computer education [1,6], whilst others look at the role of cultural diversity in higher education setting [4,7] and some others on the role of cultural diversity in teaching practice [3]. Evidently culture-awareness is gaining importance and interest but this has not been translated in design, as designers are unaware of some of the concepts, techniques and approaches thereby resulting informal, handcrafted, ad-hoc and unmaintainable interfaces. [2]

This paper seeks to place in context the interpretation of cultural diversity by staff and students in an educational setting. Data collected whilst speaking to various educators indicates that cultural diversity in schools is actively recognized through various taught modules alongside to satisfy statutory requirements. In one instance students discuss about cultural diversity evoking divisive emotions rather than inclusive ones.

It is the author’s opinion that if such divisive emotions left bottled up, could negatively impact the student and society’s wellbeing in the long run. The anecdotal experiences also touch upon the strategies that are currently in place within schools to facilitate the importance positive notions on cultural diversity and discuss students’ perception of the same.

The experiences were collected in 2 different schools. One school is recognised with an all-white student population whilst the other has over 50% of culturally diverse population with the presence of EAL (English as Additional Language) students whose first language is a foreign language.

**Experiential Observations**

*Case 1: Addressing language barriers*
The first case discusses how schools are using various strategies to over-come language barriers, an important challenge that cultural diversity presents. In one particular instance one of the schools hired a workshop leader for a workshop on the challenges that EAL (English as Additional Language) students face. The workshop leader delivered a one-hour workshop in Urdu. The frustration experienced by the teachers due to their lack of involvement or understanding in the workshop was sought to increase their ability to empathise with their EAL students. In other words, the workshop was delivered to a set of teachers to bring about a sense of empathy of how EAL students feel when they are taught in English.

Another instance is the challenge in addressing the language needs of the parents and students. Some parents have little or no knowledge of English language. They rely heavily on their children to be their interpreters and translators. So it is common for parents to remove their children during school-time to
take them to a doctor’s appointment or a local council appointment to help facilitate the communication.

Case 2: Addressing issues of community relations
In another instance, one school, which experienced a significant rise of Czech and Polish students, recognised the value and importance of integrating the new communities and therefore undertook special initiatives like hosting 'Czech and Polish' celebration days. On one hand, this seemed to attract positive attention by the new students and their parents; on the other hand, it was observed that other students felt such ear-marked celebration days meant preferential treatment and thereby creating a sense of alienation rather than integration.

Another instance led me to witness the role of cultural diversity within their curricular learning. Whilst observing an ICT class, students were learning how to use new software called Scratch, and how they could use it to build a game. One group of students, who noticed my presence in the classroom, approached me to find out if I would contribute to their lesson. Their idea was to develop a game introducing greetings from different cultures and languages around the world. This particular experience was crucial to my learning to understand how social integration can contribute in skills development at different levels.

Case 3: Addressing issues of differences
The last case engages with the manifestation of cultural diversity in the everyday life and the need for accommodating the differences. Whilst talking to group of white-British students, they mentioned that when they entered local stores while wearing their hoodies over their head, they were asked to remove it, but when a Muslim lady walked inside the store with her hijab, she was allowed to keep her head-dress on. The students mentioned that they found this attitude unfair and discriminatory.

Discussion
Through discussions with educators, teachers and students the author has noted that imparting positive notions on cultural diversity can support in social development especially that of social acceptance and integration [5].

Research indicates that involving parents to support the learning of the students encourages ‘cultural intelligence’ and builds role models for migrants students. [9]

The author’s background has been within the education sector focussing specifically in the areas of international learning. The author’s personal motivation and interest within this subject has been accelerated due to her inter-cultural interactions as a result of her upbringing in India. The author would also like to bring to notice that she has just started exploring the academic concepts focussing on HCI. She is motivated to transform her practitioner experience into a meaningful knowledge pool that has impact on a wider community of students and educators. This has thus led her to gravitate towards research within HCI particularly looking at the learning journey of culturally diverse students in schools, the engagement of their families and the impact of the two on social and emotional wellbeing of the students.
Conclusion
This paper presents a case to discuss if cultural diversity of students in an education setting is a resource for design? Are there any evident links that such design could contribute to the social and emotional wellbeing of the students and their parents? A meaningful debate and discussions with the HCI community can certainly throw light to some of the challenges presented in the paper.

References


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