



Kent Academic Repository

Thomas, Dave S.P and Quinlan, Kathleen M. (2021) *Why we need to reimagine the curricula in higher education to make it more culturally sensitive. Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 23 (3). pp. 37-47. ISSN 1466-6529.

Downloaded from

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/95131/> The University of Kent's Academic Repository KAR

The version of record is available from

<https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.23.3.37>

This document version

Author's Accepted Manuscript

DOI for this version

Licence for this version

CC BY (Attribution)

Additional information

Versions of research works

Versions of Record

If this version is the version of record, it is the same as the published version available on the publisher's web site. Cite as the published version.

Author Accepted Manuscripts

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding. Cite as Surname, Initial. (Year) 'Title of article'. To be published in **Title of Journal**, Volume and issue numbers [peer-reviewed accepted version]. Available at: DOI or URL (Accessed: date).

Enquiries

If you have questions about this document contact ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in KAR. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our [Take Down policy](https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies) (available from <https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies>).

Why we need to reimagine the curricula in higher education to make it more culturally sensitive

Dave S.P. Thomas, University of Kent

Email: d.s.p.thomas@kent.ac.uk

Kathleen M. Quinlan, University of Kent

Email: K.m.quinlan@kent.ac.uk

Abstract Persistent racial equality gaps exist in HE. We argue that culturally sensitive curricula can address those racial equality gaps as well as support the development of culturally competent graduates equipped for social change. In this short piece, we briefly describe our conceptualisation of culturally sensitive curricula and the tool we have developed to support curricular enhancement. We report on emerging evidence of the impact of culturally sensitive curricula on students' engagement and suggest how such curricula could lead to impact on educational outcomes.

Key words culturally sensitive curricula; subject interest; student engagement; higher education; racial inequality

Introduction

'Insufficient progress is being made to tackle structural racism and systemic inequalities in [higher education (HE)], creating unacceptable challenges and outcomes for students and colleagues who work [and learn] in the sector.' (Advance HE, 2021: 8)

In the UK, persistent racial equality gaps have negative consequences for access and widening participation,¹ with UK students from Black, Asian or minority ethnic (BAME)² backgrounds least likely to progress to high tariff (selective admission) universities (UK Government, 2020). Once enrolled, they experience the highest rate of attrition (Keohane, 2016), largest disparities in outcomes (Codioli McMaster, 2021), lowest rates of progression to postgraduate studies (Williams et al., 2019) and unfair outcomes in terms of graduate employment (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015).

A hostile campus environment that compromises BAME students' potential to thrive³ has been cited as a key causal factor

that promotes and sustains structural inequalities (Museus, 2014; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015). While there are many aspects of student experience, we focus on curricula as a key part of campus environments. We argue that students' perceptions of the curriculum have implications for their engagement and, more specifically, students' interaction with teachers and their interest in the subject. Both of these indicators of engagement are associated with higher attainment (Hu et al., 2008; Jansen et al., 2016) and BAME/White gaps exist on both of them (Lundberg and Schreiner, 2004; Quinlan, 2019). Thus, for educators to reduce the awarding gaps, they need to create educational environments that promote BAME students' engagement. Figure 1 illustrates this set of assumptions.

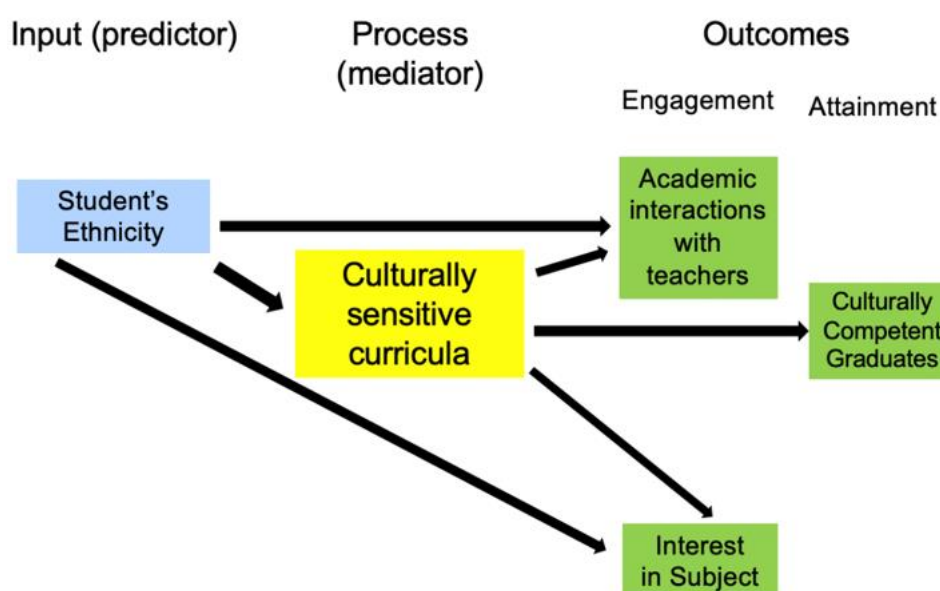


Figure 1 – Conceptual Framework

Our work is anchored in Critical Race Theory (CRT) – a methodological and conceptual framework that highlights the extent to which racism is structurally ingrained in the curriculum (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995), with hegemonic whiteness as the *norm*. Based on CRT, we contend that educators in HE tend to teach in supposedly culturally neutral ways. Insofar as White is seen as normative and, therefore, “neutral”, students are

overexposed to White-dominant perspectives that undermine the value and intellectual worth of viewpoints from other demographic groups.

We argue that BAME students notice the Whiteness of this curriculum (Peters, 2018) and that it erodes their engagement – specifically their interest in the subject and their interactions with teachers. As one student put it, ‘The only time we look at non-White material is in relation to colonialism (slavery/anti-slavery) or extremism, and the material tends to be negative as opposed to positive’ (UoK Manifesto in Thomas and Jivraj, 2020: 22). Therefore, we call for culturally sensitive curriculum in which attitudes, teaching methods and practice, teaching materials and theories relate to and respect students’ diverse cultures, histories, identities and contexts. Prior studies have highlighted the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), culturally responsive education (Bryan-Gooden et al., 2019) and culturally responsive classroom climate (Holgate, 2016). Yet, there are no race-focused (DeCuir-Gunby and Schutz, 2014) instruments specifically designed to measure higher education students’ perceptions of the cultural sensitivity of their curriculum.

Researching Culturally Sensitive Curricula

The field needs new tools to be able to define, assess and reflect on the cultural sensitivity of the curricula as well as to understand its relationship with student engagement and attainment. To address this gap, we conceptualised and developed a new set of Culturally Sensitive Curriculum Scales (CSCS) which make an important conceptual and methodological contribution to research. Our scales built on three CRT-consistent frameworks (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Holgate, 2016; Bryan-Gooden et al., 2019). We developed 19 Likert-scale items (1=*strongly disagree* to 4=*strongly agree*) about students’ perceptions of the cultural sensitivity of the curricula, which grouped into four dimensions:

1. Diversity represented, which refers to whether ethnically diverse peoples’ experiences and perspectives are represented (Bryan-Gooden et al., 2019).

2. Positive portrayals, which captures how racialised minority groups are represented, seeking to overcome stereotypes (Bryan-Gooden et al., 2019).
3. Challenge power, which refers to encouraging students to develop critical consciousness and socio-political awareness (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995).
4. Inclusive classroom interactions focus on classroom interactions between teachers and students and among peers (Holgate, 2016).

We administered a survey with these items (Table 1) to a diverse sample of HE students to better understand how they perceived their curricula. We also surveyed those students on their engagement with the curricula. In particular, we asked them about their academic interaction with teachers and their interest in the subject. We briefly summarised the findings of this study (see Thomas and Quinlan, 2021a for more details).

Scale	Item#	Item
Diversity Represented	DR1	The curriculum features people from diverse backgrounds.
	DR2	The curriculum references different ethnic and cultural traditions, languages, religions and/or clothing.
	DR3	Diverse ethnicities and nationalities are portrayed
	DR4	Diverse family structures (i.e. single parents, adopted or fostered children, same-sex parents, other relatives living with family, etc.) are portrayed.
	DR5	Differently-abled people are represented.
	DR6	People of diverse ethnicities are represented as researchers or professionals, not just as participants in research, clients, consumers, customers, etc.
	DR7	The curriculum respects that different cultures may have different understandings, skills and/or philosophies.
	DR8	The curriculum addresses problems that are of concern to marginalized people/communities.
Positive Portrayals	PP1	When social problems (e.g. crime, violence) are presented, people of colour are usually considered the problem. (R)
	PP2	When interpersonal conflicts are presented, people of colour are usually considered the problem. (R)
	PP3	When people of colour have problems, white people are usually presented as being able to solve those problems. (R)
Challenge Power	CP1	The curriculum raises critical questions about power and/or privilege that are usually taken for granted.
	CP2	The curriculum encourages students to challenge existing power structures in society.
	CP3	The curriculum encourages students to critique unearned privilege.
	CP4	The curriculum encourages students to connect learning to social, political or environmental concerns.
	CP5	The curriculum encourages students to take actions that fight inequity or promote equity.
Inclusive Classroom Interactions	ICI1	My instructors make an effort to pronounce everyone's name correctly.
	ICI2	My instructors encourage students to be mindful of other students' perspectives.
	ICI3	My instructors encourage students to respect other students' perspectives.

Table 1 - Culturally Sensitive Curricula Scales (CSCS): Constructs and Items

BAME students perceived the curriculum as less culturally sensitive than their White peers on all four dimensions of cultural sensitivity. BAME students also reported fewer academic interactions with their teachers than White students. Each component of the CSCS was shown to explain the relationship between ethnicity and interaction with teachers. That is, we may be able to improve students' interactions with teachers by making the curriculum more culturally sensitive. Additionally, BAME students reported significantly lower interest in their programme of study than White students. The Diversity Represented and Challenge Power components of the CSCS each partially explained this interest gap between BAME and White students. Thus, we have evidence to support the links assumed in Figure 1 between ethnicity, culturally sensitive curricula and engagement. We do not yet have evidence on the link between culturally sensitive curricula and attainment. The new CSCS scales are a vital tool, though, for investigating those linkages. We are further developing the scales to ensure applicability in a wider range of settings and also are trialling them in evaluations of the impact of curricular changes. In our study, we focused on students' overall programmes. However, we think it may also be a useful tool at the module level and are currently experimenting with that approach.

In addition to serving as a research and evaluation tool for programmes or modules, we hope that the CSCS will also serve as a guide for reflection and action by teachers. The items themselves can be read as 19 actions teachers can take to enhance their curricula. Teachers could, therefore, self-assess their own teaching materials and processes in their own modules against these items. Alternatively, they could ask students to rate the items and compare students' ratings with their own self-assessments as a process that complements traditional module evaluation forms. It can also serve as a tool for supporting overall programme evaluation, insofar as it offers a checklist to guide curricular review.

A principle of CRT is that dominant groups only support changes that meet the needs of marginalised groups when the change also benefits them (Bell, 1980). Although our primary aim was to assess and enhance the curriculum so that it benefits BAME students, we also think that attention to culturally sensitive

curricula will benefit all students. Across all the students in our study (Thomas and Quinlan, 2021b), perceptions of the culturally sensitive of curricula predicted students' interaction with teachers. Two dimensions of cultural sensitivity (diversity represented and challenge power) also predicted students' interest. That is, making curricula more culturally sensitive may engage all students more fully.

While our conceptualisation of culturally sensitive curricula centres race, it speaks to the entire widening participation agenda insofar as it seeks to foreground social justice. We think that when students glimpse visions of social justice in their curricula and see pathways to achieving greater social justice, that they are inspired. Furthermore, culturally sensitive HE curricula may create more culturally competent students. Students who can take multiple perspectives, appreciate the value that diverse people bring, and know how to participate in inclusive conversations will be able to make meaningful contributions to society. Employers have now discovered that failures to engage diverse employees in workplaces is very costly (Accenture, 2020). Therefore, employers are looking for culturally competent staff who will contribute to nurturing diverse talent and creating climates where all employees can thrive.

Conclusion

Shaun Harper, in his Presidential Address to the American Educational Research Association (2021), called on researchers and teachers to accept individual and collective responsibility for complex educational and social problems. Widening participation comes with responsibilities to develop campus environments conducive to equitable outcomes for students. The curriculum is one key aspect of the educational environment.

We developed and validated a new instrument to assess the cultural sensitivity of curricula and support further research on this key aspect of campus environments. Using it, we found that BAME students saw their curricula as less culturally sensitive than their White peers, which helped explain why BAME students in our study had fewer interactions with their teachers and lower interest in their subject. Re-curating curricula to make them more

culturally sensitive will ensure that all students can see themselves and their cultures affirmed and the problems of their cultural communities acknowledge and addressed. Our findings suggest that when curricula do that, students will be more engaged. Our study showed there is a particular need to make curricula more culturally sensitive for students from minoritised and non-traditional backgrounds, for whom current learning environments seem to inadvertently pose barriers to engagement. We also suggest that such curricular changes may reduce racial degree awarding gaps, as well as grow graduates who are equipped and inspired to contribute to social betterment, though more research is needed on these issues.

¹ Widening participation strategy in higher education in England is designed to improve access to young people who are under-represented in higher education – for example, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, racialised minorities and looked after children (Weedon and Riddell 2015). In England and Wales, the term 'looked after children' is defined in law under the Children Act 1989 and relates to a child who is in the care of or provided with accommodation by the local authority for more than 24 hours.

² The acronym BAME is an umbrella term which is inconsistently used in governmental research in UK to identify a range of people belonging to Black, Asian or minority ethnic backgrounds. Notably, this identifier has been imposed on people, as opposed to them self-identifying in this manner.

³ The term 'thrive', as it is used here, encompasses achieving a sense of empowerment, positive, inclusive classroom interactions with teachers/peers, development of interest in their subject/programme of study, learning and academic achievement.

References

- Accenture (2020) *Getting to Equal 2020: The Hidden Value of Culture Makers*, at <https://www.accenture.com/us-en/about/inclusion-diversity/acnmedia/Thought-Leadership-Assets/PDF-2/Accenture-Getting-To-Equal-2020-Research-Report.pdf>.
- Advance HE (2021). Advance HE Strategy 2021-24: Helping HE Shape its Future. [Online]. Available at: [https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2021-05/Advance HE Strategy 2021-24.pdf](https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2021-05/Advance%20HE%20Strategy%2021-24.pdf).
- American Educational Research Association (2021) 'AERA President Shaun Harper calls on researchers to accept responsibility for educational and social problems', at <https://www.aera.net/Newsroom/AERA-Highlights-E-newsletter/AERA-Highlights-April-2021/AERA-2020-President-Shaun-Harper-Calls-on-Researchers-to-Accept-Responsibility-for-Educational-and-Social-Problems>.
- Bell, D. (1980) 'Brown vs. Board of Education and the Interest Convergence Principle', *Harvard Law Review*, 93: 518-33.
- Bryan-Gooden, J., Hester, M. and Peoples, L. (2019) *Culturally responsive curriculum scorecard*, New York: Metropolitan Centre for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools, New York University.
- Codioli McMaster, N. (2021) *Ethnicity Awarding Gaps in UK Higher Education in 2019/20*. London: Advance HE.
- DeCuir-Gunby, J.T. and Schutz, P.A. (2014) 'Researching Race Within Educational Psychology Contexts', *Educational Psychologist*, 49, 4: 244-60. doi:10.1080/00461520.2014.957828.
- Holgate, H. (2016) *Development and Initial Validation of a Culturally Responsive Classroom Climate Scale*, MSc thesis, Purdue University.
- Hu, S., Kuh, G. and Li, S. (2008) 'The Effects of Engagement in Inquiry-Oriented Activities on Student Learning and Personal Development', *Innovative Higher Education*, 33: 71-81.
- Jansen, M., Lüdtke, O. and Schroeders, U. (2016) 'Evidence for a Positive Relation between Interest and Achievement: Examining Between-Person and Within-Person Variation in Five Domains', *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 46: 116-27.
- Keohane, N. (2016) *On Course for Success? Student Retention at University*, at <http://www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/UPP-final-report.pdf>.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995) 'Towards a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy', *American Education Research Journal*, 32, 3: 465-91.

- Ladson-Billings, G. and Tate, W. F. (1995) 'Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education', *Teachers College Record*, 97, 1: 47–58. doi:10.4324/9781315709796-2.
- Lundberg, C. and Schreiner, L. (2004) 'Quality and Frequency of Faculty-Student Interaction as Predictors of Learning: An Analysis by Student Race/Ethnicity', *Journal of College Student Development*, 45, 5: 545–69.
- Mountford-Zimdars, A., Sabri, D., Moore, J., Sanders, J., Jones, S. and Higham, L. (2015) *Causes of Differences in Student Outcomes*, Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).
- Museus, S.D. (2014) 'The Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) Model: A New Theory of College Success Among Racially Diverse Student Populations', *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*, 29: 189–227. doi:10.1007/978-94-017-8005-6_5.
- Peters, M.A. (2018) 'Why is My Curriculum White? A Brief Genealogy of Resistance' in Arday, J. and Mirza, H.S. (eds.) *Dismantling Race in Higher Education: Racism, Whiteness and Decolonising the Academy*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 253–70.
- Quinlan, K. (2019) 'What Triggers Students' Interest During Higher Education Lectures? Personal and Situational Variables Associated with Situational Interest', *Studies in Higher Education*, 44, 10: 1781–92. doi: 10.1080/03075079.2019.1665325.
- Thomas, D.S.P. and Jivraj, S. (eds.) (2020) *Towards Decolonising the University: A Kaleidoscope for Empowered Action*, Oxford: Counterpress.
- Thomas, D.S.P. and Quinlan, K.M. (2021a) 'Reimagining Curricula: Supporting Minority Ethnic Students' Interest through Culturally Sensitive Curricula', Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, 8–12 April 2021, Orlando, Florida, USA, at <https://kar.kent.ac.uk/87272/>.
- Thomas, D.S.P. and Quinlan, K.M. (2021b) 'Reimagining the Curricula in Higher Education: Increasing Students' Interaction with Teachers and Interest through Culturally Sensitive Curricula', Open University 6th Biennial International Conference on Access, Participation, and Success, 15–18 March 2021, at https://www.open.ac.uk/about/wideningparticipation/sites/www.open.ac.uk/about/wideningparticipation/files/files/6th-conference/1_9_Reimagining_the_curricula_in_higher_education_-_Increasing_students'_interaction_with_teachers_and_interest_through_culturally_sensitive_curricula.pptx.
- UK Government (2020) *Widening Participation in Higher Education*, at <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/widening-participation-in-higher-education> (accessed: 25 May 2021).

Weedon, E. and Riddell, S. (2015) 'Higher Education in Europe: Widening Participation' in Shah, M., Bennett, A., and Southgate, E. (eds.) *Widening Higher Education Participation*, Amsterdam: Chandos Publishing, 49–62.

Williams, P., Bath, S., Arday, J. and Lewis, C. (2019) *The Broken Pipeline: Barriers to Black PhD Students Accessing Research Council Funding*, at <http://leadingroutes.org/?mdocs-file=2943>.