Self-segregating social groups in a super-diverse university

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Abstract

London Metropolitan University prides itself on the diversity of its student population. However, as Hollingworth and Mansaray (2102) have indicated, the social mix of an institution is not necessarily reflected in the degree of social mixing that occurs within the institution. In their case study of a mixed secondary school in England, they note how social spaces become segregated through the choices students make about where to 'hang out' and with whom. This paper explores the extent of social mixing in the 3 year undergraduate Early Years Teaching programme at London Metropolitan University by examining how the students group themselves together within their teaching classes. Our observations indicate that students most frequently choose to organise themselves in groups where members share age / ethnicity / religion. The research explores the extent to which the students are conscious of this self-selection, and sets out to gain some insight into the reasons they have for these patterns. We also explore the extent to which the students feel these patterns affect their ability to work with, and identify with, others in the teaching class, outside of their self-selected groups. Finally we also investigate the strategies these student teachers have used in their own teaching practice in schools and children's centres. In particular we focus on the extent to which they allow children to self-select groups or make decisions about grouping themselves and whether when they do make decisions about groups, this is done explicitly to promote social mixing within their class. The paper ends with a reflection on the extent to which the socially diverse classes at the university result in social integration or merely allow for social segregation to be reproduced within shared spaces.

Keywords*: Deracialised discourse, social grouping, identity, community cohesion, colour-blindness*

Introduction

This was a small scale case study focusing on how students in the second and third year of a BEd Early Years Teaching course chose to mix within the class and during their time at the university. The aim was to identify the extent to which the students were conscious of self-selecting their study / friendships groups which appeared to be based on ethnicity, religion or age.

London Metropolitan University is a diverse university that promotes widening participation and the BEd Early Years Teaching course traditionally attracts students from a range of cultures with a minority white British population. Students in each year group tend to group according to similar patterns for example by culture, religion or age.

Lecturing staff use a range of strategies, including splitting friendship groups, to encourage students to work with other people in the class. The response to this is mixed, with some students suggesting they felt uncomfortable being forced to work together and that this resulted in the process being unproductive due to the lack of discussions taking place. Other students suggested it was beneficial as they were less likely to go off task and remain focused.

The participants who took place in the research were self-selected, with all second and third year cohorts invited to take part. This resulted in approximately 7-9 students from each year group participating. The students were divided into smaller groups to complete a socio-metric mapping exercise in which they were given plastic counters to represent students in the class and asked to place them on a large piece of paper to represent their class' usual self-chosen seating and grouping arrangements. The second part of the exercise involved the students labelling the groups according to common characteristics. Students then checked each other's version of the seating arrangements, noting the similarities and differences between their socio-metric maps of the class. Following these activities students were brought together to participate in a focus group with each year group and a number of questions were asked regarding the benefits and possible problems of students retaining their self-chosen groups, and whether their groupings affected their ability to work with other students in the class. They were also asked whether their preference for self-selecting groups to work with in taught sessions mirrored the strategies they used whilst on teaching practice, for example allowing children to choose where to sit or not, and whether this was done to promote social mixing in school.

Super-diverse classrooms and social mixing
Our original stimulus for this small research project was Hollingworth and Mansaray's (2012) article exploring the lived experience of social mixing in a comprehensive secondary school in the UK. They concluded that:

> "While the social mix of the school is celebrated, in official discourse as congenial and 'convivial', by staff and students alike, the extent of actual mixing - of associations and friendships forming between those of different social and ethnic backgrounds - is both constrained and complex… Schools are sites of differentiation, and friendships as exemplars of social mixing, both (re)produce and are (re)produced by existing social hierarchies and inequalities."

Their findings reflect Bell and Hartmann's (2007) earlier research in the USA where they describe everyday discourse about diversity as a form of 'happy talk'. In both cases participants discussed diversity in broadly positive terms, but ignored problems and tensions and also tended to downplay or ignore dimensions of diversity relating to race, ethnicity and inequality.

Hollingworth and Mansaray frame their research in the British context in which 'comprehensive' schools were imagined to break down social barriers by providing young people with a broad experience of different social groups – a position which clearly reflects Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis. Whilst arguments for comprehensive

schools have been superseded in the English context by calls for a diversification of school types, the contact hypothesis has received recent further support through the proliferation of community cohesion policies, which aim to achieve a "common vision and sense of belonging" (Alexander, 2004: 540 cited in Worley, 2005). This implies two separate but related strands of activity. The first aims to create a shared civic identity and the second aims to tackle the perceived threat of extremism and terrorism (Starkey, 2008), and both present agendas for action by schools and universities (Jerome & Clemitshaw, 2012).

Vertovec (2007) has explored the community cohesion policy agenda specifically in relation to the concept of super-diversity in a report commissioned by a government appointed *Commission on Integration and Cohesion*. He argues that, in their desire to promote deep and meaningful relationships between different communities in the UK, policy makers may ignore the valuable forms of civil integration achieved in the everyday processes of 'getting along'. In some ways this approach is complementary to Gilroy's (2004) account of 'conviviality' in diverse societies, and for Vertovec the maintenance of civility in everyday interactions is an important marker of people's successful coping strategies in super-diverse societies. This might manifest itself in what Sandercock (2003: 89) calls 'the daily habits of perhaps quite banal intercultural interaction' for example small gestures, greetings, acknowledgements, even keeping a respectful distance from others. Whilst Lofland (1998) has explained this as a result of the urbanite's indifference to 'others', Lee (2002) draws attention to the effort involved in achieving and maintaining this level of civility in the city – both from people who may feel offended or threatened by others, and by newcomers struggling to learn the linguistic and physical gestures associated with this performance of civility. However, Vertovec argues these everyday small interactions are nonetheless important because they function as a way of coping with social diversity and enacting everyday civil integration. As he concludes, in a super-diverse world it is probably too much to expect everyone to like everyone else or develop deep friendships with 'others' but even a 'veneer of civil integration' (Vertovec, 2007: 33) serves an important function in social cohesion.

However, whilst he is a keen advocate for acknowledging this level of cohesion, Vertovec also maintains that in other situations, where people from different backgrounds come together for sustained periods of time, with specific shared purposes, we should expect the development of different, deeper forms of social interaction. For Vertovec, schools and workplaces emerge as the most likely shared spaces where inter-group contact can be developed, and in this he mirrors some of the more established policy approaches to community cohesion in the UK (Cantle, 2008). But he does propose a more refined approach to the simple contact hypothesis for analysing the impact of such policies and suggests three processes that might occur:

> "The first is 'decategorization' or personalization, in which the salience of in-/out-group categories are diminished and members of groups get to know each other as individuals. The ideal here is to break down any monolithic perceptions of an out-group as a homogeneous unit, and to reduce the importance of categories overall. The second possible process is 'recategorization' in which members of two or more groups

acknowledge membership in a common, higher order or more inclusive category (transforming representations of 'us' and 'them' to 'we'). A third contact process has been called 'mutual differentiation' by way of which cooperation or interdependence is stressed while maintaining and recognizing distinct group boundaries and membership" (Vertovec, 2007: 28).

These three possible processes clearly reflect different degrees of social cohesion and resonate with the debates about multiculturalism in the UK, which have recently focused on whether government should accept that people will choose to stay within cultural groups, leading largely separate lives, or whether policy should promote an expanded sense of collective identity (McGhee, 2008). One might imagine that if 'decategorization' were the dominant process it would lead to a form of liberal multiculturalism, in which individual identity is significant; whereas if 'recategorization' were dominant it might lead to a more collectivist or communitarian outcome. The third process of 'mutual differentiation' seems to represent the established mode of multiculturalism in the UK, which has been recently criticised as masking an informal segregation, although perhaps with stronger connections between communities representing enhanced bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000).

These processes all support Allport's general hypothesis, that contact under certain conditions will promote better mutual understanding. However, in the case of the BEd students in our study, where friendship groups were sometimes deliberately separated by lecturers in order to facilitate engagement with others, the student response was mixed and it was not always evident that any of these positive processes could be identified. Kelly (2008) suggests that for group work to be positive it is necessary for teaching staff to be culturally responsive in their teaching approaches, noting that "multicultural groups take time to develop the ability to work together and overcome cultural and communication barriers". He further notes that, whilst there were "cognitive process benefits" for some, integration and communication remained difficult for others. He also confirmed that there was more cohesion and collaboration in self-chosen groups, suggesting that "for students, group work can be a source of friendship and support, leading to greater motivation and satisfaction levels which may manifest in learning, student retention, progression, performance and affective outcomes." Disrupting groups that bring these advantages must therefore be done sensitively, to ensure problems are minimised and new advantages can be secured. Such sensitivity requires teachers to be alert to different cultural expectations about valuable classroom behaviour; awareness of students' limitations in English and the value of being able to discuss ideas in languages other than English (Schafer, 2011); and the subtle ways in which groups operate to exclude others and to remain exclusive from others (Kundnani, 2005).

Discussion of Findings
The following pictures illustrate how two groups in one cohort constructed separate socio-metric maps which showed a high degree of agreement. We took these social maps of the classroom as our descriptions of social groups and built the focus group conversations from there. These conversations were transcribed and the two authors read and annotated them separately to identify key themes which emerged. The following

section presents three themes which we identified from this analysis in the light of our reading of the relevant literature. Additional data is also drawn from recordings of the small group conversations which took place during the mapping activity.

Figure 1 Two groups socio-metric maps showing a similar interpretation of groups
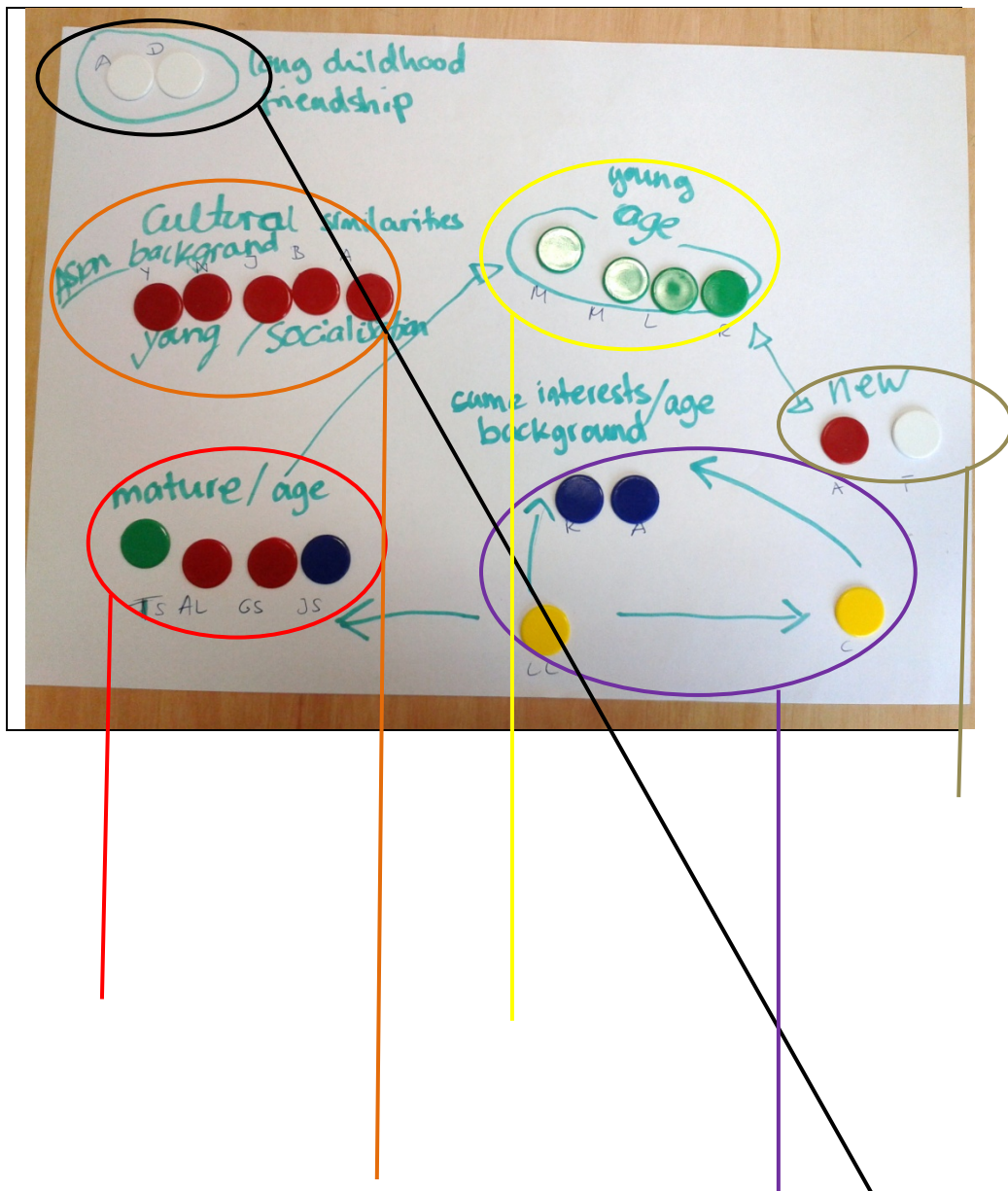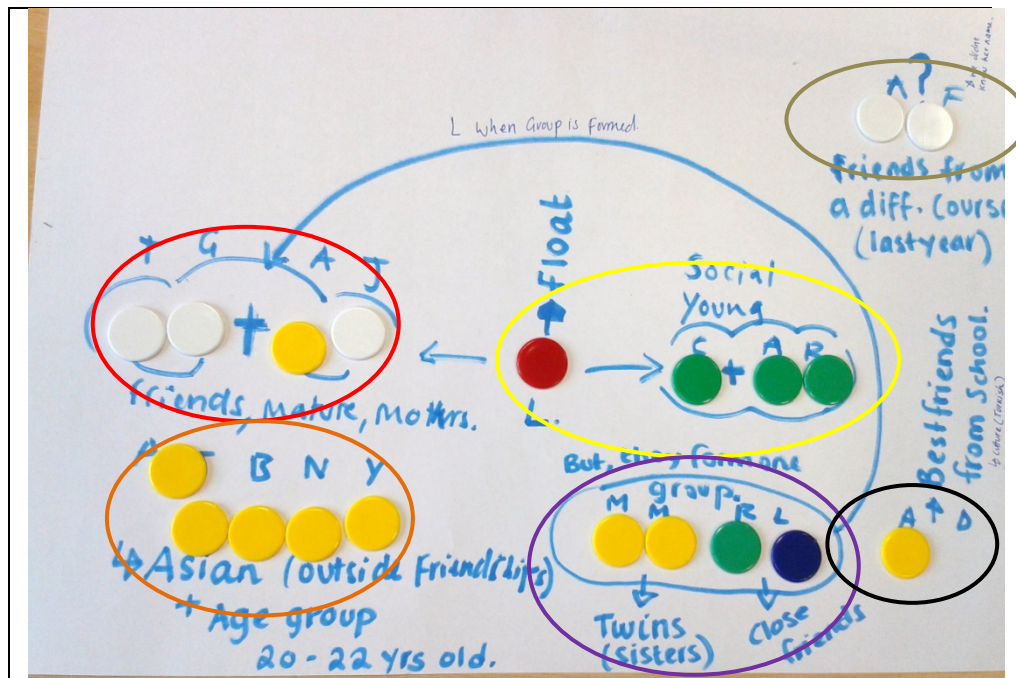
(1) Discursive deracialization

One of the most striking features of the students' conversations about their social groups was their avoidance of the notions of ethnicity and culture, even though these were clearly key characteristics of their groups. The students' hesitation about using racialized language may reflect the adoption of a 'colour-blind' approach, which describes the naïve intentions of people hoping to promote inclusion, without recognition of difference. Park's (2011) review of the research evidence indicates that, whilst young children develop biases in relation to skin colour at a very early age, there is often a tendency for people to avoid acknowledging that they "see" racial differences during social interaction. Whilst our students found it difficult to identify common traits in groups without making direct reference to religion, race or ethnicity, their reluctance is not uncommon and possibly insightful, as Park notes that "language is not neutral and nothing can be said about race that does not carry the historical and political baggage of conversations that have come before" (Park, 2011: 394). This phenomenon has also been discussed by Augoustinos and Every (2007: 133) who use Reeves' (1983) term 'discursive deracialization' to describe discourse in which "racial categories are attenuated, eliminated, or substituted and racial explanations are omitted or deemphasized."

This avoidance of the language of ethnicity was observed in each of the groups and gave rise to some strange alternative labels which acted as ciphers for ethnicity and culture. Hence one group of mature students (mostly parents) described another group of young Asian and Somali Muslim women as 'team, culture, non-drinking, compassionate.' When this group had the opportunity to discuss how they had been described the following conversation ensued:

'I like how they emphasise the non-drinking' (laughter)

'Yeah'
'Why would you do that?'
'Are we like natural alcoholics then?'
'Yeah'
'Or maybe as opposed to the drinking group then?' (non-Muslim commented)

This clearly emerged as an issue as the group returned to the point later:

'I'm just not happy with the non-drinking'
'What? It's true'
'Other than that (laughs)'
'I know but it's the fact that they've specified non-drinking and I think that's a bit....'
'It's true we're the same culture, non-drinkers...'
'It's a bit...'
'Yeah that's one point same culture'
'It's true we're all Muslims...'
'I guess when you think some students are all about the drinking and that's how they socialise'

Here the group are clearly struggling to articulate quite what it is that seems odd about being characterised in this way. Although they recognise that some in their group do not drink alcohol, they do not see this as a defining or even especially significant aspect of their group identity. Hopkins & Blackwood (2011: 218) noted that "there is psychological injury when others fail to recognise or categorise us in terms that are consistent with how we see ourselves" (cited in Howarth et al., 2013). It seems to us though that there is something more going on here than simply the unfamiliarity of other people's perceptions.

It seems significant that almost all the students struggled to describe Muslim groups. In the current context, in which there is a heightened awareness of Islamophobia, we felt that all groups, both Muslim and non-Muslim, were frequently searching for ways to avoid labelling groups as Muslim, perhaps because that has become such contentious territory. In the case of the group who came up with the idea of a 'non-drinking' euphemism for Muslim, their initial discussion included the following exchange:

'They've got, sort of'
'Yeah they've got culture' (hesitant with wording)
'Non-drinking'
'OK well they've got the same culture then'
'Are they all Muslim? Are they all non-drinking?'
'But there could be sort of different, sort of.. Mus'
'Muslim'
'Yeah'

The reticence to use the word 'Muslim' draws attention to the nervousness created simply by using the term, and the lack of confidence about how to talk about Islam seems significant in this groups eventual decision to minimise the term and 'hedge' their interpretation with different language. Interestingly this reticence could also be seen within Muslim student groups where, despite having recognised that some of the main things they have in common are that they pray together and eat Halal food, they describe themselves on the socio-metric map as the 'chatty' group. Now clearly this is an

important additional characteristic of this group, they are quite chatty and the group leader is fairly outspoken in class, but it seems significant that they do not label themselves in terms of culture or ethnicity, even though they acknowledge they share these characteristics.

Several groups chose to use the general term 'culture' as a proxy for religion or ethnicity, and this exchange shows that this seems to have almost become synonymous with 'minority ethnicity' because the students struggled to understand how the general term culture could be applied to a group of white British and Irish students, even though there are clear cultural connections that emerge. There seems to be a reticence to acknowledge the breadth of the term 'culture', partly we speculate, because it is being used to signify 'minority ethnicity' rather than in its full meaning.

Sarah Pearce wrote from her perspective as a white, middle class woman educated in a fairly homogenous semi-rural context about her experiences starting to teach in multicultural London classrooms about race and identity (Pearce, 2005). Her account is filled with examples of her struggle to connect with the reality of children's lived experience of diversity, because it was so alien to her. Her ethnographic research charts her growing confidence in facilitating these conversations and one is left with the distinct impression that it is her lack of personal experience which makes this such a difficult area to engage with. In some ways this is a perfectly understandable narrative, however, the data from our students indicates that even when students themselves are drawn from a range of socio-economic, religious, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, they still lack an accessible language for engaging with these identities and differences, and revert to 'neutral' euphemisms ('non-drinking, compassionate' instead of 'Muslim'), hedging strategies ('I hope I'm not offending anyone') and outright avoidance of these issues ('chatty' instead of Muslim young women). On the one hand students seem keen to use language which is 'post-racial' and therefore focus for example on the distinction between the 'chatty' students and the 'whispering' ones, which for them confirms the redundancy of ethnic or religious identity. However, this is clearly a discursive or rhetorical strategy, because the students remain split broadly along the lines of more traditional social stratification – ethnicity, religion, culture, class and age. It seems their discursive construction of the social relationships within their teaching group is out of alignment with the actual social relationships. They recognise the groupings, acknowledge these groupings somehow feel natural and yet resist describing them in terms which connect their experience with the broader discourse about identity, social differentiation and inequality. This is all the more marked because they are students on a teacher education degree which teaches them about these issues in the context of educational inequality and inclusion.

(2) 'Natural' social groups and 'fixed' identity

Whilst there was a tendency, discussed above, to avoid engaging with the nature of social identity and the social divisions within the group; there was also an underlying sense that the groupings that had emerged were 'natural' in some way and had emerged almost inevitably. Although the scientific concept of race has largely been discredited, the everyday experience of race persists. Haney-Lopez (2003) suggest "racial ideas generally operate within the sphere of common sense, which constantly informs our thinking and our actions and is so pervasive that it feels normal and natural" (cited in Park, 2011). Long (2004: 15) notes that people commonly use ''fuzzy'' and ''implicit''

definitions of race in which ''races represent a pattern of variation that is difficult to pinpoint but clear to most people'' (cited in Park, 2011). This reflects Smaje's thesis that race continues to be seen as a 'natural hierarchy' based on the "idea that people can be divided into ordered collectivities on the basis of some transcendent… principle which seemingly establishes these groups as sui generis" (Smaje, 2000: 2).

After the comparison of the socio-metric maps we asked students more directly about the fact that these divisions seemed to reflect ethnicity, religion and age and to explain why this had happened and what significance it had. One Muslim woman simply said 'I think our group is obvious' and for many of the respondents there are some 'obvious' explanatory factors lying behind the emergence of these social divisions. In the discussion in one of the Muslim women's groups they discussed their shared commitment to prayer as a key factor:

> *'The thing, we're so close together like we all pray so like oh lets go and pray'*
> *'Yeah'*
> *'If I said that, if I was with another group they would be like what? Huh? What's that? You know what I mean?'*

Here an 'obvious' factor is simply the mutual understanding that people would have to use the prayer room at lunch time. It became evident that it was not so much the act of prayer (some of the women in this group did not pray during the day), but more the perception that this was understood and accepted and would not be seen as unusual. However, as the group discussion indicated, this also involves characterising everyone else as somehow 'other' and therefore unable to understand the need to pray.

The group which was largely formed of mature students, most of them mothers, argued that:

> *'It is the age, life experiences, we have children, we can relate to one another, we support one other as well, that's the basis of our group'*
> *'We have that understanding, when you have a little one the [de]motivation you can get. Someone who doesn't have a child may not understand...'*

And others pointed out that the groupings emerged without any deliberate planning or thought:

> *'I didn't plan to get into a clique, it just happened she (the other Somali) just came over'*
> *'This is a subconscious thing because until we really focused on it, I don't think we deliberately ...'*
> *'No we didn't do this on purpose, it just happened that way'*

It seems that, in addition to these social divisions arising spontaneously, they are also generally recognised by many of the respondents as a beneficial feature of their experience:

> *'Everyone is comfortable now, at the beginning you need to find out who you fit with or who thinks the same as you do, well after three years you sort of know'*
> *'You are included'*

Thus, social divisions in the class, replicating social divisions in the wider community, and frequently creating feelings of discomfort about working with others, are described as the building blocks of inclusion. This reflects our argument that many of the students felt an innate sense that these divisions somehow reflected a natural way to order social relationships. This also confirms the patterns of grouping behaviour observed in an American University by McCabe (2011) who observed students' 'homophilous relationships' which reflected a tendency to associate with same race others.

Some also recognised that there was another mechanism at work here, more akin to building alliances to protect one's own interests. This reflects a more political understanding of the function of groups, which began to emerge in some of our conversations towards the end of the workshop:

> *'So if everyone is grouping in this way they are kind of protecting their own interests: if you got all the Muslims they stick up for one another; you've got the mature, when it comes down to childcare and placements they're gonna stick up for each other. So what happens is you don't get the mix'* (Said by a mature student, looking for confirmation from the Muslim students)
> *'So it's like protection'*
> *'Yeah'*

This reflects the acknowledgement that these groupings might also serve a more instrumentalist function, although this was not a line that developed strongly in either group discussion.

(3) Transgressing boundaries
So far we have argued that for these students their social groups seemed to be relatively fixed and natural and generally separated by quite clear boundaries. However, as the data from one student indicated, it is still possible to transgress these boundaries, in her case by seeking to deliberately avoid working solely with one group and nurturing good relations with others, so she could experience working with different groups. There were other occasions when boundaries are transgressed. First during school placements, when students are sometimes placed in a school or nursery setting in pairs, and therefore are forced to work together; and at other times when lecturers deliberately disrupt the social groups in workshops and force people to work together with others.

This final observation would seem to give some encouragement to the idea that lecturers could alter the conditions in the class to encourage people to work across groups more readily – a notion that fits with the broader commitment that we might teach people to transgress (hooks, 1994). One of the lecturing team in fact does this routinely in her classes and this was the object of considerable discussion in our workshop. Some students said they talk less when they are grouped with others outside of their self-selected groups, although they also acknowledged they spent more time in off-task talk when they were allowed to group themselves. Others experienced it as more difficult:

> *'It totally throws us'*
> *'Yeah it throws all of us actually'*
> *'We are all used to this, not that we can't socialise with each other, I don't know…'*
> *'Putting us in those groups… it just not comfortable.'*

This reflects the fact that some of these groups inevitably feel a stronger internal attachment and a greater sense of separation from others. As our socio-metric maps demonstrate, some groups are more fluid than others with some looser and smaller groups relating to one another, whilst others are more firmly set. It seems to be those students who experience these tightly knit groups who feel more threatened by being forced to work with others. On the one hand this might be due to the fact they are more familiar with those in their self-selected groups and therefore working together builds on those strong interpersonal relationships. Working with others therefore presumably simply entails feeling a loss of security and a recognition that one has to work harder to learn how to work with others. On the other hand, we got the impression from some of our respondents that the task was more difficult and uncomfortable because they had to work with people with whom they felt little affinity or even some form of mistrust or animosity. This is almost always framed as being the fault of the 'other' person – they are characterised as being racist, or disrespectful. Therefore 'they' make it difficult to work with 'them'; 'we' do not introduce such difficulties.

We also asked the students how they managed children's groupings when they were teaching them. This elicited a range of responses, but the common element was an assumption that their own learning as adults was completely difficult to children's learning. Thus, whilst almost all our respondents argued they should be able to choose their own groups in class, they did not draw a parallel with their own classrooms when they were teaching. This meant several were able to argue that their self-selected (segregated) groups were acceptable, whilst for children this was unacceptable. These students argued that children:

> *'will gain more from children they don't normally work with...'*

And that children in early years settings are

> *' too young to be already seeing the difference.'*

So, according to the students there are at least two problems with children working in socially segregated groups. First they will 'gain' from the simple process of working across 'natural' social boundaries, which is clearly linked to the established tradition that 'social mixing' is a positive benefit of multicultural schooling, which leads to important lessons about difference and toleration. Second, there is an assumption that somehow children are (and should remain) ignorant of these established ethnic, cultural or religious differences, which is clearly linked to a tradition of protecting children from the harsh realities of adult life. Here social mixing is valuable because it extends the period of innocence, when one is colour-blind. As we have seen above the research literature has confirmed that children are generally aware of such differences and frequently make judgements based upon them (Elton-Chalcraft, 2009, Park, 2011).

We had the sense that this second impulse was more dominant because it was also compatible with sometimes selecting a strategy of tolerating social segregation within the class. One conversation, for example, made the following distinction:

> *'They feel comfortable'*
> *'I wouldn't split them. On placement I had a group of Turkish boys.... If I had split them they would have been miserable'*
> *'If they singled out other children that would be a problem'*
> *'If they naturally formed then it would be fine'*

Here we see an assertion, more akin to the earlier argument about their own groupings, that although there may be a racial, ethnic or religious dimension to the social divisions, if the group members were grouping together because they 'felt comfortable' then that was only 'natural' and would lead to a more inclusive and happier classroom. The only word of caution here is if the group showed animosity towards others. This reflects exactly the narrative developed about their own class dynamics in which everyone felt their own impulse to join their group was positive, but that problems were caused by others withdrawing into their groups for negative reasons.

Conclusion

Vertovec (2007) when writing about super-diversity perpetuates the idea that when people come together in educational institutions or workplaces, they will develop deeper relationships. In McCabe's (2011) study of Higher Education she also argues that more diverse institutions encourage more social mixing. However, our experience of working with these undergraduate students, in a super-diverse institution where there is no ethnic majority group, indicates that these assumptions remain problematic. Our students tend to group through choice along ethnic and religious lines with age being the only significant variant. Whilst they claim to get along with others in the group they rarely chose to work with others and report feeling uncomfortable when asked to by lecturers. Therefore, whilst there is no evidence that social mixing spontaneously occurs, there is evidence that these students can maintain the daily habits of 'banal intercultural interaction' (Sandercock, 2003) or what Vertovec (2007) describes as a veneer of 'everyday civil integration' whilst finding deeper relationships uncomfortable or difficult. The students are broadly happy with their experience of their self-segregated classroom and feel that this everyday conviviality creates a comfortable environment for them. In Vertovec's terms we have seen 'mutual differentiation' in which group identity and boundaries have been sustained or strengthened, but in the context of some cooperation between groups. This raises the possibility that super-diverse social contexts may facilitate a greater ease of communication between groups, rather than create the multicultural melting pot of popular imagination.

Whilst these students depoliticise and deracialize their understanding of the group dynamics in their university classroom, they are nevertheless able to articulate a more nuanced understanding of the social dynamics of the groups of children they teach. Many of the students are open to idea that teachers should intervene to make sure that children have direct experience of working with others. However, in their discussions about children's groupings some of our students continue to place an emphasis on the importance of grouping as an expression of personal preference and draw a distinction between children coming together because they want to be together (positive) and children coming together because they want to exclude others (negative). This requires the teacher to make value judgements about any particular grouping and significantly fails to recognise the objective nature of such grouping strategies, which simultaneously serve to include some children and exclude others.

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