Exploring The Experiences Of Ethnically Diverse Families In Our School Community: A Case Study

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1. Introduction

This case study does not work towards answering a specific question but rather takes an inductive approach towards exploring the experiences of diverse families within one semi-rural school community in Fife, Scotland. The context is one within which I practice, which should be acknowledged as a moral driver. The school itself serves a population of 509 pupils, 9.2% of whom were enrolled as Non-White Scottish in 2018/2019. An increase from 6.5% in 2017 but still substantially lower than the national average of 15.9% in 2015 (Scottish Government:2015).

Gaining an understanding of the experiences of BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) families is pertinent in reflecting on how we as a school provide an inclusive learning environment which celebrates diversity and eliminates discrimination as outlined in HGIOS4 (2015). A greater understanding of experiences can potentially impact wider social change through re-conceptualising educational approaches to diversity. As practitioners, we strive to meet the demands of policy in practice, striving for social justice through 'valuing as well as respecting social, cultural and ecological diversity and promoting the principles and practices of local and global citizenship for all learners' (GTCS, 2012, p. 5). Notably, Sachs (2000, p.93) identifies that the potential for practitioners to actively impact wider social change 'comes from educators understanding their practice, but also from understanding themselves in relation to the society in which they live'.

2. Participants and Consent

50% of our families who identify as other than White Scottish chose to participate in this study. It was conducted between November 2018 and July 2019. Parents took part in group and individual interviews and consented to learners engaging in group based discussions. All teaching staff contributed through 4 planned collegiate sessions and data was gathered from non-teaching staff through informal dialogues. Furthermore, the wider school community were given the opportunity to engage with the study.

Participant families were contacted at the beginning of the case study development and given an outline of the research intended. Participant consent forms gave the option for parents/carers to accept and/or informed consent for their enrolled children. This also gave the option for participants to specify the level of anonymity any potential data produced may require, an option to request an interpreter and preference for group or individual interviews. Data collated from all data sets was anonymised with the use of pseudonyms where necessary.
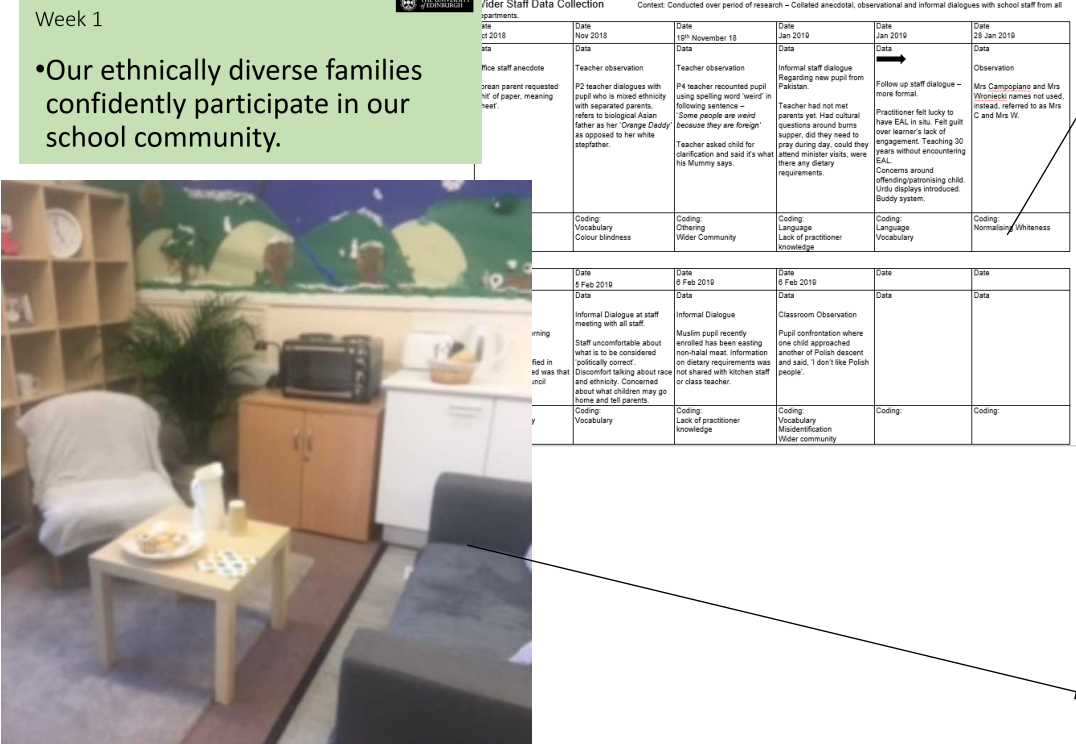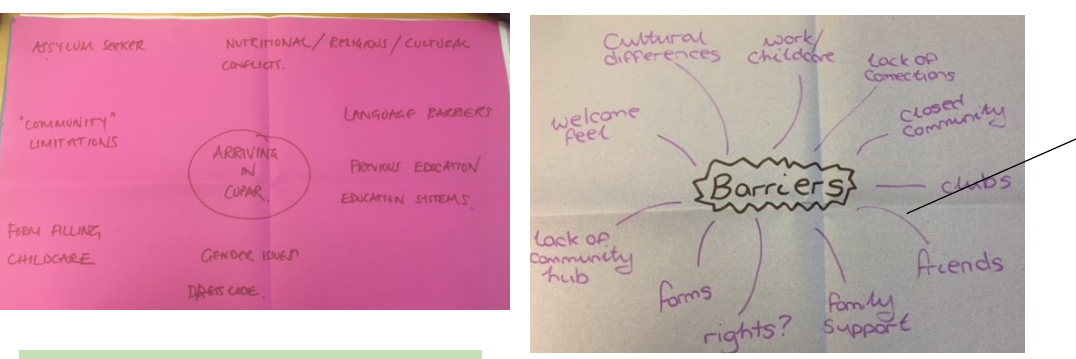
3. Methodology

This study assumes a constructivist epistemology, adopting a case study methodology. Stake (1995:101) stipulates that 'the aim of research is not to discover…but to construct a clearer reality' and therefore this study aims to derive a clearer understanding of the experiences of learners from ethnically diverse backgrounds within the context of one school. According to Hutchison (2006:302) 'It is plausible for people who derive from different cultural perceptual contexts to create different meaning of the same experiences…multiple realities.' Therefore, semi- structured, but predominantly informal interviews and group discussions were favoured as a data collection method as these facilitated discourse between participants and the researcher in order to enable the co-construction of meaning and understanding of learners and families experiences (Roulston 2010, Scheurich 2006). This study acknowledges the reflexivity required for this approach but argues that this is necessary in order to build rapport and trust with participants in pursuit of rich data.

Case Study Rationale and Design :
This study takes the form of an **exploratory case study**, 'characterized as the collection of data and subsequent looking for patterns in the data' (Hamilton, Corbett-Whittier 2013:6). By taking a case study approach, it was anticipated that this study will glean 'the close up of reality and 'thick description' of participants lived experiences of, thoughts about and feelings for' our school community as learners from minority communities (Cohen, Manion, Morrison 2007:254). Given that 'case study usually takes place within the qualitative paradigm, providing a genre that focusses on… smaller groupings or individuals and attempts to answer questions about contexts, relationships, processes and practices' (Hamilton, Corbett-Whittier 2013:23), it was deemed the most suitable method for the research statement. With what can potentially be difficult subject areas for discussion, the case study approach and interview methods used enabled participants the freedom to talk about their experiences and be heard, free of judgement. This also allowed time for participant and researcher to clarify points and negotiate meaning in order to come to an understanding of experiences within the context.

Qualitative data collection methods were an intrinsic part of the research design as they are generally 'used to uncover essential features of a case and then illuminate key relationships among these features' (Ragin 1994:103). This supported an inductive approach to research, enabling key themes to emerge more authentically from the data as opposed to deducing meaning from experiences within a given theoretical framework. An inductive approach sits comfortably with the constructivist epistemology this study assumes.

4. Data Collection and Analysis

Participants and Qualitative Method	Suitability for Purpose	Strengths	Limitations	Themes that emerged from data analysis: Coding
Teaching Staff – group interview/discussions and group tasks.	Gave rise to a "Purposeful conversation" amongst staff and enabling groups to lead discussions around tasks, this eliminated an aspect of "researcher dominance" (Scheurich 2006).	• Built in to collegiate schedule with guaranteed participants. • Manageable data set.	• Staff conscious of professional group setting and potentially not willing to share all their beliefs. • Limited to the questions asked/task set.	Challenges/discrimination in wider community influencing school community, Language, general practitioner knowledge, terminology, early years Vs. Upper stages, Deficit Views, Colour Blindness, lack of curricular inputs, othering
All Staff - journaling of informal observations, discussion, shared anecdotes.	Useful in recording staff recounts and anecdotes these shared when staff had informal dialogues stimulated by research. No time restrictions.	• Informally made staff willing to share anecdotes. • Wide range of contextual experiences collated.	• Jottings, not comprehensive accounts. • Recounting of incident potentially long ago – perceptions are subject change over time.	Wider community, Language (Pupils and parents), practitioner confidence/knowledge, terminology, stereotypes
Pupil – Scenario based group interviews	It was felt that groups prevented individuals feeling singles out and scenarios acted as a stimulus for discussion as 'attempting to elicit deep and rich data from children…can be very challenging…scenario-based interviews might elicit richer descriptions' (Jaidin 2018:24)	• Scenarios stimulated discussion. • Group discussions did not single children out. • Scenarios offered learners ability to talk in 3rd person.	• Only 2 scenarios shared. • Limited contact time. • Vulnerability of children. • Group interview format – some learners may have been reluctant to share openly.	Lack of family, accents, wider community, terminology, coping strategies, micro-aggressions, othering, colour blindness, stereotypes, embarrassment
Wider School Community (all parents) – feedback/comments box	Enabled whole school community engagement – not just those identified for the case study. Could be conducted over a short period of time during a time when whole school community could be exposed.	• Offered anonymity. • Gave an opportunity to contribute for all stakeholders, not just those identified for the case. • Easy to set up.	• Poor levels of engagement. • Anonymity made potential to follow up with discussions or to clarify meaning difficult. • Restricted to whole school event.	Wider community, lack of curricular inputs
Parents (identified for study) – Informal and semi-structured group and individual interviews	In keeping with the epistemological stance, interviews enabled formation for discussion and co-construction of data. - 'Qualitative researchers take pride in discovering and portraying the multiple views of the case. The interview is that main road to multiple realities." (Stake 1995:64)	• Rich and detailed data opportunities. • Group interviews offered validation of participant experiences. • Opportunity to delve deeper into issues raised or seek clarification. • Develop trust and rapport with participants.	• Data bank created was challenging/time consuming to transcribe. • Data is subject to interpretation. • Interview process as time intensive. • Data open to endless interpretation. • Potential for transcripts to decontextualize data.	Lack of family support, General Practitioner knowledge / lack of curricular input, Accents, Pupils coping strategies, othering, Language, Wider Community, Terminology, Micro-aggressions, Early years vs. Upper stages, Deficit views, Colour blindness, stereotypes, embarrassment.

Pupil Data Set — **Staff Data Set** — **Common Themes** — **Parent Data Set**
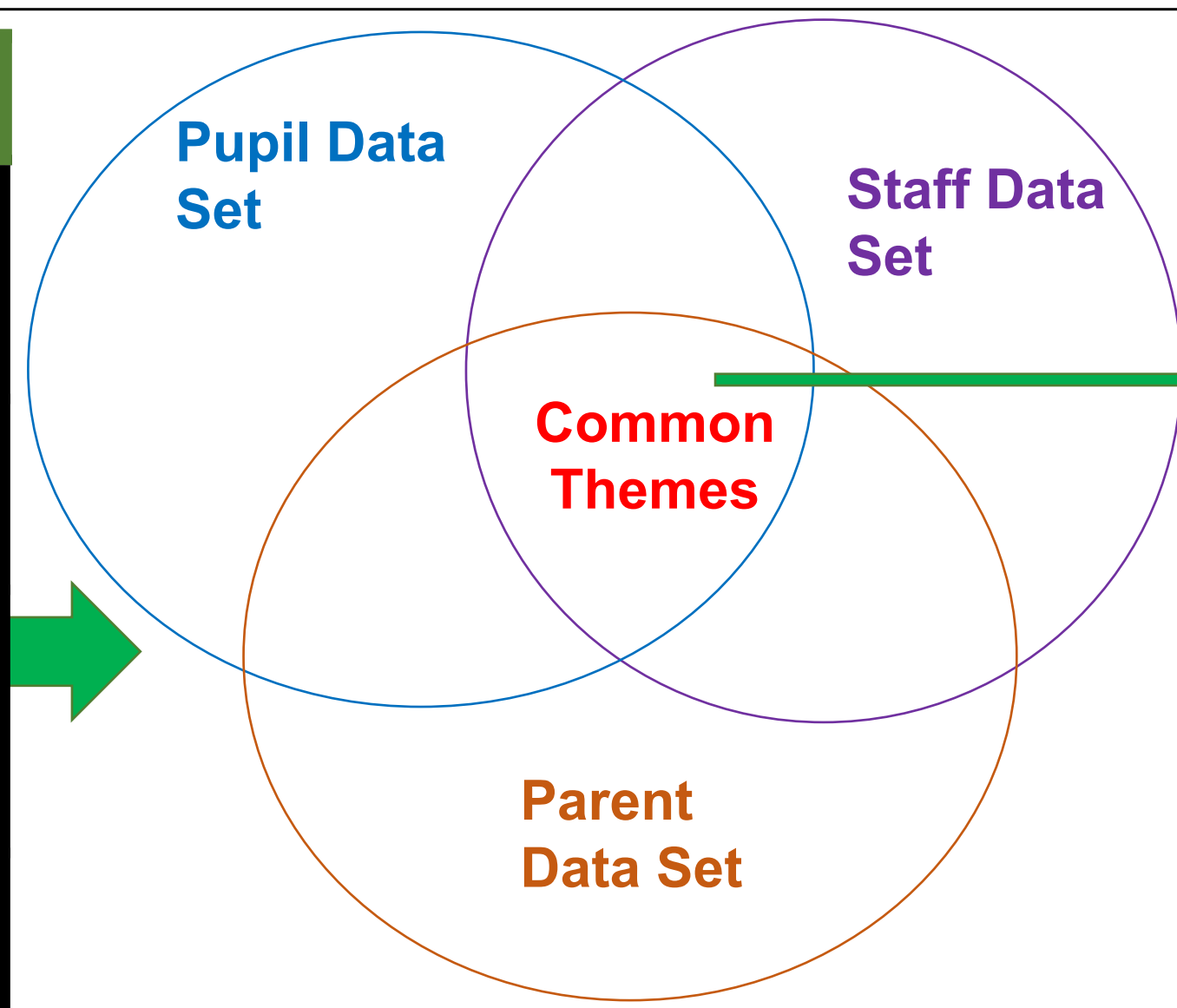
Inductive Approach

An inductive approach was taken so as not to force assumptions top down onto the case study, but rather, encourage the emergence of themes and patterns from the data on which to focus and further direct reading and analysis. This approach is arguably symbiotic with the methodology and rationale put forward. The inductive approach has also been effective in teasing out the key themes amongst the sometimes large, multiple source data sets and codes generated.

Coding

" The quantitative side of me looked for the emergence of meaning from the repetition of phenomena. The qualitative side of me looked for the emergence of meaning in the single instance" (Stake 1995:76)

While 3 emergent themes from the codes are discussed below, further themes emerged – crossing over between data sets. These could potentially be the foundation of further analysis should the scope of the study have accommodated this.

Giving consideration to reflexivity, the codes generated and applied are themselves a product of my own interpretation and application of the data. This makes them subjective to my own beliefs and participation in the data gathering. When further analysis the data and codes, it was found that some anecdotes or snippets of data were susceptible to multiple codes and many codes crossed over. On occasion, secondary or third analysis of data led to complete code changes when data was reconsidered alongside other data or literature. The codes became fluid and workable. When grouping instances of codes, common themes emerged whereby codes straddled themes and themes encompassed multiple codes.

5. Data and Discussion

Staff Data Snapshot	Pupil Data Snapshot	Parent Data Snapshot
Stimulus using scenarios reflective of one family currently enrolled: "Neither my partner or I are British and have limited English. Moving to Scotland and enrolling our children at this Primary School would be an easy transition for our family" **What staff did to engage with this:** • 5 staff groups developed lists/mind maps during group discussion. Reoccurring themes in all 5 groups: • Recognition of language barrier challenges. • Cultural barriers – uniform, rules, routines, lunches. • Wider community as a barrier. • It could be interpreted that the responses were all barrier focused.	"Once, when I was coming to school, somebody picked on my Dad's accent…they said he doesn't sound very much like a person…" Pupil C "I think even if we did share it as a culture, not even people in the class, it would make it awkward. You don't know what they're going to say. They can see something and just laugh at it." Pupil O "…that would be Chinese new year, the main thing we get taught about. And just that" Pupil O	"He was born here, he's got dual nationality so he's British as well as Czech… It's very hard for him to hear this, he's more British" Parent 13 "He told his friends he's going to Poland then in the summer time, we are only going 2 weeks and they ask him, are you not coming back?" Parent 12 "The usual questions I get are, 'where are you from?', London… 'No, but where are you from?'… London!' Parent 3 "One of the children said, and Pupil P, he's from China, Pupil P said I don't come from China! I come from [Fife]…" Parent 18

→ **Theme 1** — Misrecognition and Stereotyping

Provocation derived from HGIOS 4 "I can confidently talk about the diverse ethnic representation in our school community…" • Staff in 4 groups compiled lists of the school ethnic demographic spread and were able to identify many different backgrounds of learners – none comprehensive. • All recorded nationalities or country names. None recorded any specific African countries. • No differentiation of culture/nationality/ethnicity or mixed backgrounds. • None recognised White Scottish as a group.	"When I'm out and about , like, in the playground, I get made fun of…I don't mind, I know I've got different skin colour… it doesn't affect me. I've got different skin colour and I don't think about it much." Pupil H "Somebody picked on me for my skin… they said why is my face made of chocolate?" Pupil Q	"Til you speak and you actually say something and they hear your British Accent it's almost like they understand that…they look at you first don't they?" Parent 7 " So last year we drove down and we stopped at, I think it was Milton Keynes at one of these big massive eh, road places and it was heaving with like bus trips… it had every ethnicity that you could imagine…and I just remember the girls walking in and just being like…and just looking at everybody and I remember being like, oh my god, you actually do what people do to you…staring at them" Parent 1

→ **Theme 2** — Normalised whiteness and Racism

Derived from HGIOS 4 "Our ethnically diverse families confidently participate in our school community…" Post-it responses post discussion with 14 members of staff: • ½ responded with 'don't know' • 3/14 responded they felt they do in lessons. • 3/14 identified language as a barrier to this. • Some staff felt this was dependent on individual families and not related to their ethnicity or culture. • Staff found this difficult to comment as they have limited contact with parents. In journaled observations, the School coffee morning in a local community hall only saw 1 family identified in the study attend.	"I find it hard when we have to learn Scottish poems and I need to ask like my, um, I can't really get help from anybody at home. They don't really know how to speak that brought anything… I was quite shocked" Pupil K "If I was sharing where my Dad came from I would have a stage fright or something because I usually stand out from the class …" Pupil N	"He wants to fit in… at the moment if he will probably talk too much about our country they will be saying more you are Czech than British… he is worried…he's proud at home… he wants to fit in, better not talk or the comments will come out" Parent 13 "When Pupil F started P1, I wasn't aware of snack time… I didn't know until I met his teacher and she said by the way do you know we have snack time and he never brought anything… I was quite shocked, I was so sorry for him…" Parent 4 "Since starting school the desire to speak Italian at home has clearly dropped off because he wants to be the same as his friends…" Parent 10

→ **Theme 3** — Cultural Pluralism Vs. Assimilation

Misrecognition and Stereotypes
Failing to appropriately identify an individual's ethnicity and applying stereotypes in an attempt to acknowledge their ethnicity or culture.

All data sets demonstrated misrecognition/misclassification in action within the context. In staff this emerged in the deficit view of incoming pupils, for the pupils themselves and their families, this was evident in the challenges their children faced in sharing and recognising their diverse and complex backgrounds. Learners who experienced incidents of othering, stereotyping or misidentification reported feeling sadness and anger. Occurrences of misrecognition have the potential to impact a learners emotional wellbeing. The data gathered points to a lack of understanding or appreciation of complex identities, evident in what is interpreted as a deficit view by staff of incoming pupils from diverse backgrounds and the stereotyping and generalisations that have taken place in pupil experiences. Learners indicated a lack of breadth covered in the curriculum regarding global culture and it could be argued that stereotyping is not helped by the context's tendency towards tokenistic representations of diversity "…denigrating cultural difference to the study of samosas, saris and steel bands…" (Mullard, Cited Coulby 2006:246)

In reflecting on culture itself, Grant (1984, p.23) explains, 'cultures are growing things, to be developed rather than preserved'. There is a resonance of this in the writing of Tupas (2014, p.245) who states that culture is a dynamic, fluid and complex entity... culture is essentially cultures- plural- with national culture as only one dimension '. This strain of thought is again evident in what Ladson-Billings (2014, p.75) defines as the 'heterogeneity of cultural experience'. By this, Ladson-Billings (2014) is highlighting that complexity of cultural identity and uniqueness to individuals, influenced by multi-cultural upbringings, generational settlement and differing notions of nationality and ascription to multiple cultural movements and strata. With increased globalisation and diversity, individuals cannot be categorised merely by ethnic or cultural identity but need to be considered and understood as individuals who may identify with a complexity of ethnic and cultural communities. Whilst children from diverse backgrounds that participated in the study demonstrated an ability to navigate multiple cultures, their experiences indicated a general lack of *cultural competence* (Ladson-Billings, 2014) amongst the predominantly white Scottish school population.

Normalised Whiteness and Racism
This is understood to be dominance and normalisation of 'white Scottish' in which anything other is considered a deviation.

Multiple children indicated feeling embarrassed by their cultural practices. Parents were disheartened that their children were relinquishing their cultural uniqueness in favour of dominant cultural practices. Delpit (1992:245) similarly discusses the prevalence in attitudes of BME learners towards success as "acting white" and highlights the frequency in which 'well intentioned teachers, utter, 'I don't see colour, I only see children'". She further raises that this perpetuates a belief that there is something wrong with recognising being black or brown, that this should be invisible.

One parent shared their child now favours English as their dominant language in the home and rarely speaks their second paternal language, here is clear evidence of assimilating to the normalised narrative. Some pupils discussed are from a mixed black British background and are one of only 4 mixed black families in the case study school. The scenario described by Parent 1 exemplifies the normalisation of whiteness for even children from BME backgrounds whereby they are so accustomed to those in their environment being so mono-ethnic, that they themselves are experiencing potential a sense of othering when exposed to such diversity. Even for learners who come from BME backgrounds, there is evidence of a normalised whiteness and this begs the concern of what the implications could be for their own sense of identity.

Further pupil data shared here is indicative of several statement made by learners whereby micro-aggressions or racism are downplayed. This is highlighted by Arshad et al (2017:8) as an emergent issue as "the extent to which young minority ethnic people took the view that racism just happens". Coping strategies/scripts exemplified in further pupil statements highlight beliefs of the potential 'jealousy' of other children, that 'they just didn't know' and they are 'different' - all excusing discriminatory behaviours.

Cultural Pluralism Vs. Assimilation
Cultural Pluralism as the argument for multiple cultures to co-exist amidst the dominant culture as opposed to assimilation in which "those who were othered were expected to give up their otherness to fit in." (Arshad et al 2017:9)

Despite the progression farther from assimilationist practices and doctrines, the argument for cultural pluralism is still being put forward by authors such as Coulby (2006) and Delpit (1992, p.245) who documents an instance whereby African American pupils had spoken about 'doing well in school' as 'acting white'. Further evidence of underlying assimilationist experiences in education are found in multiple readings. Arshad et al (2017, p.8) details the experiences of a Scottish Algerian pupil who 'avoids being judged as Muslim by not mentioning his faith group' in order to appear as 'normal' alongside many other illustrative examples whereby there is a 'need to merge and not be seen as different'. This same scenario occurred within this study in which one participant shared that they do not discuss their faith with their peers.

In response to the lack of knowledge by practitioners highlighted in the data, when discussing a deficit view of immigrant learners, Delpit (1992:242) suggest that "To counter this tendency, educators must have knowledge of children's lives outside of school so as to recognise their strengths". The case study context needs to know the pupils and families better in order to support a more culturally pluralistic approach as opposed to propagating assimilationist practices. For example, in considering this incident shared by Parent 4 , it was anticipated the parent would know about snack time and the structure of the day/ local practices and the parent felt guilt for not already having this knowledge. However, had the practitioner considered that this may not have been the norm in their country of origin, it could have been communicated. Here, the parent blamed themselves for not assimilating.

6. Conclusions

Though very limited in scope, the responses from the wider school community demonstrated a trend whereby responses from white-Scottish families portrayed a contentment with the school's approach to global diversity, however, responses from BME respondents communicated a discontentment. It was recognised in data that learners from non-dominant ethnic backgrounds apply stereotypes and can be prone to misidentification, often not intended to be malicious.

• The school context is host to a predominantly white Scottish narrative.

The curriculum requires further development to embed opportunities to explore diversity and challenge a predominantly white Scottish narrative in the context in order to tackle misrecognition and stereotyping. Parents, staff and pupils all suggested a school wide event to celebrate global diversity. Staff would benefit from opportunities to develop their own understanding of cultural and ethnic diversity – enabling staff to differentiate between ethnicity, nationality and culture as well as develop further understanding of the cultural practices and values which may present in an increasingly multicultural classroom. The schools staff are predominantly White Scottish and it is evident that " Teachers' beliefs have a strong impact on the classroom's educational and social climate. Often, teachers are unaware of their own ideological assumptions which have been "naturalized" to such an extent that they are finally seen as being part of common sense... A pluralistic attitude...is likely to encourage the adoption and development of a multicultural orientation…" (Vedder 2006:162). Cultural and ethnic diversity in the entire Scottish teaching force needs to be more representative of society and the classrooms in which they teach.

• Children who are culturally Scottish but ethnically diverse identified multiple instances which suggest they are considered as 'others'.

Data indicated that instances of racist terminology and micro-aggressive incidents were most common for children from black backgrounds, regardless of their British cultural backgrounds. Children and families from 'white' minority ethnic backgrounds shared that incidents of discrimination had taken place as a result of their accents or when they had disclosed their backgrounds. More needs to be done to address othering of non-dominant groups. Incidents need to be reported more effectively by pupils, parents and staff and these tackled appropriately. Potentially, all parties would benefit from more information of how to report incidents and how these are dealt with. The development of a school policy could raise awareness amongst staff and give parents insight into the procedures in place.

• Children from diverse backgrounds seek to conform or assimilate to the dominant culture of normalised whiteness.

This is resonant of the work Delpit (1992) discussed above whereby children assimilate in order to avoid feeling different or being singled out. Several participants and parents identified this as a strategy – this included children who avoided sharing their religion, had stopped using their second language in the home in favour of English and some reluctant to discuss their country of birth. Parents found this upsetting but also shared that they sympathised with why their children opted to do this. More needs to be put in place to encourage children to share their uniqueness through the development of an environment where they would not be judged, singled out our discriminated against.

• Participants felt that a deficit views of 'others' in the local community are a contributing factor in the school community.

This would warrant further investigation into the socio-historic context of the community and liaison with community groups and services such as community police.

• Ethnicity, Culture and Religion all sit separately but each individual can present with one or more of these that differ to the non-dominant culture. Each child should be considered individually.

All staff need to be mindful of the diversity of families in our school community and their backgrounds. All staff need to be mindful at times when cultural demands are made of a child who has a different cultural experience or lacks support with facilitating such requirements – for example, Scots poetry. Incoming families from culturally diverse background would benefit from heightened transitions with more information on the school, their rights and wider context made available.

• Children and families demonstrated a tendency to accept micro-aggressions as an inevitability.

The data indicates that parents and children are downplaying/dismissing incidents as 'not a big deal', 'builds resilience' or 'something they'll have to deal with all their life'. Children and parents are not reporting issues or discrimination motivated by ethnic or cultural diversity.

There may be scope to lead parent engagement and school wide pupil learning opportunities to explore discrimination further and the rights children have as well as empowering all learning with the tools to respond/report should they experience or witness an incident. As Broadbent (1993:3) states, "…'education for a multicultural society', as propounded largely in English-speaking countries, is flawed because it does not constitute a sufficient challenge to existing power structures. It is suggested that unless social inequality and racism are challenged head-on, multicultural education can only provide a consolidating veneer to the process of assimilation and alienation…". Education must acknowledge diversity and wider social narratives in order to realistically educate children for and amidst globalisation.

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