

SEDA Research and Evaluation Small Grant 2023

Raising racial and ethnic representation within performing arts training: evaluating the effectiveness of implementing an Inclusive Curriculum Framework

Introduction

The lack of diversity in the performing arts workforce is well documented, with the acknowledgement that the pipeline from training to ‘treading the boards’ needs to change. Specifically, the representation of Black, Asian and minority ethnic within the performing arts remains a point of discussion. 2020 saw universities, conservatoires and drama schools making public statements and commitments to tackling racial injustices, with reinvigorated efforts to ‘Decolonising the Curriculum’. Four years on, momentum to decolonise learning experiences and curricula within my institution appeared to be inconsistent and required a mechanism to provide direction. This project, therefore, looked to evaluate the effectiveness of implementing an ‘Inclusive Curriculum Framework’ educational development pilot initiative, in part designed to enhance racial and ethnic representation across performing arts curricula, as an evidence-based case to rationalise wider roll-out across the institution.

Methodology

The starting point was to consider which of the framework’s statements would be a focus for enhancing racial representation in curricula. Table 1 outlines the relevant framework statements that were focussed on for this project.

Table 1: Relevant framework statements to guide enhancing racial representation

Curriculum design area	Framework statement
Students' voices	Students' voices are being captured in multiple formats to review, modify, and enhance content and delivery.
Design	Content materials are representative, reflecting the diversity of the student community in ways which are positive, avoiding deficit model perspectives.
Delivery	The diverse student community are provided with opportunities to learn collaboratively enabling students to recognise the value of working with people from diverse backgrounds.
Assessment	There are assessments which allow students to draw on their own background.

The voices and perspectives of racially minoritised students on performing arts programmes were central to contextualising generic inclusive practice statements embedded within the framework, for effective implementation and as a driver for change. Narrative inquiry was utilised to capture racially minoritised students' experiences of being seen and unseen, informing the application of the Inclusive Curriculum Framework's generic statements around enhancing racial and ethnic representation.

Between October 2023 and February 2024, group and individual interviews with 15 racially minoritised final year students on both undergraduate and postgraduate performing arts programmes were conducted to understand their experiences of representation within their learning journeys. By applying Purdie-Vaughn and Eibach's (2008) intersectional invisibility model as an analytical lens to the experiential stories provided by participants to identify their experiences of non-prototypicality, findings highlighted key areas for curriculum enhancement for programmes in line with the framework statements. These included but not limited to:

- Accent training by culturally diverse people who have authentic accents.
- Dance training in contemporary and commercial that is authentic and not 'whitewashed'.
- Training and assessment in styles of performance that are culturally diverse from the start of their programme.
- Increase diversity of external creatives contributing to the curricula. One particular session with a member of the 'Hamilton' cast was highlighted as exemplary practice in enhancing racial representation and students 'feeling seen'.
- Casting in roles by merit rather than expected norms.
- Perform in more diverse plays that avoid perpetuating stereotypes. Further, casting decisions avoid 'miscasting' through staff (unconscious or conscious) bias that can disadvantage racially minoritised women in particular.
- Diversity in the staffing profile supports a sense of belonging to the university and the industry.
- Take into consideration time differences when interviewing international students for places on programmes.

Development outcomes

Subsequent meetings (instead of initially planned workshops, due to the nature of some of the findings being issues that cannot be remedied immediately or during the lifespan of this project) with conservatoire practitioners and Head of School to consider ways forward resulted in a clear action plan for enhancing racial representation, including short-term, medium-term and long-term actions for change. This action plan is being embedded in the programme review process prior to the start of the new academic year 2024/25. Staff noted that some issues raised were from the students' early experiences on the programme which have since been addressed through the Curriculum Design Review process implemented across the university in the last three years.

Actions include but not limited to:

- With the recruitment of a new (racially minoritised) voice trainer in the last year, clarity and variety on accent work to be a focus.
- Build a bank of diverse creatives as contacts who could provide additional support to students or could be invited in to enhance representation and authenticity to training. The teams wish to avoid tokenism, though.
- Incorporate more commercial training, reflecting the changing landscape and skills set needed. Plus, work to find the right (and authentic) trainer. The choreography team to move this forward.
- Staff training on (conscious and unconscious) bias to prevent perpetuating stereotypes and miscasting decisions.
- Work with the Admissions Team to ensure recruitment interviews do not disadvantage international students who are in a different time zone.
- Audit roles in plays in the last five years to evaluate casting decisions and bias in casting.
- Diversifying staffing is a long-term issue but noted and heard.

The conservatoire teams found the process of implementing the Inclusive Curriculum Framework via students' voices beyond existing evaluation mechanisms a valuable and enlightening activity. The Head of School noted that the framework allowed for staff to focus the mind, providing an accessible tool that enables opportunities to ask the right questions for curriculum enhancement, particularly for racial representation. The process of implementing the framework also increased the existing culture of reflection to recognise that diversifying mechanisms for capturing students' experiences through multiple formats for curriculum enhancement is critical.

Dr Janet Ramdeo

Stewart Nicholls

Jo Franklin