SHIFT INSIGHT

Teaching: Diversity & Inclusion

Written by Lisa Mai & Tilly Barkway

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LOOKING BEYOND THE WORKPLACE AND INTO EDUCATION SETTINGS

Whilst the topic of diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) is being widely discussed in a business context, the spotlight on the workplace is overshadowing the Education sector, where DE&I is just as crucial.

Apart from teaching maths, history or science, the education environment also plays a crucial role in establishing values, building confidence and shaping young people's sense of self. Gender and sexual identity, race and ethnicity, religion and beliefs, and disability – all are topics that students are confronted with both in class and in their day-to-day interactions in school, college or university.

The meaning of DE&I[1]

Diversity: Refers to the variation between people. This includes parts of our identity that are considered 'innate' (like race, age, nationality, etc.), and aspects that are 'acquired' (like cultural fluency and languages spoken).

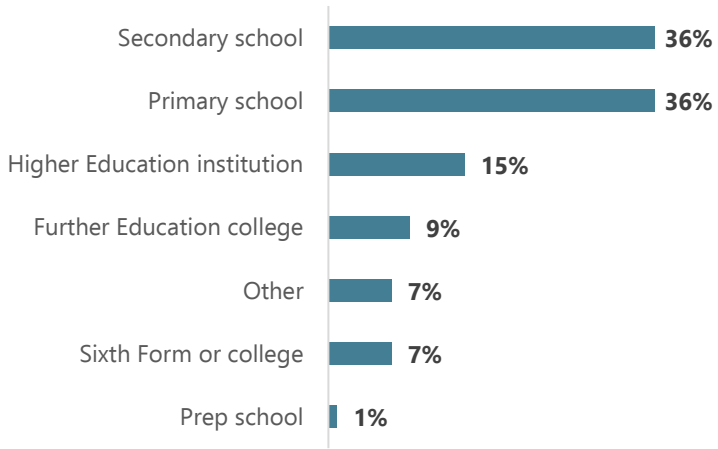
Inclusion: The practice of including people in a way that is fair for all, values everyone, and empowers each person to be themselves.

Equity: Working towards fair outcomes for people or groups by addressing their unique barriers. By comparison, equality is the state in which everyone is treated in the same way, typically working on the assumption that everyone starts out on an equal footing with equal opportunities.

DE&I IN EDUCATION SETTINGS: THE EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

In order to successfully guide students and write policies, educators don't just need to be subject experts, they also have to have expertise when it comes to applying DE&I.

Our educator sample (n=521)



This is what we set out to explore as part of a **wider thought leadership survey of educators regarding sustainability in teaching.**

Whilst schools are already surveying their students about their experience of 'equality and protected characteristics',[2] and there is research with teachers about diversity in school topics, materials and resources,[3] we couldn't find research about the DE&I 'readiness' of educators. So, we asked them ourselves:

How confident are they when it comes to talking to students about topics such as gender identity or race and ethnicity? How much potential to discriminate do they feel their institution's appearance policies carry? And how well do they know how the Equality Act – which is supposed to protect against discrimination – applies to teaching institutions' policies?

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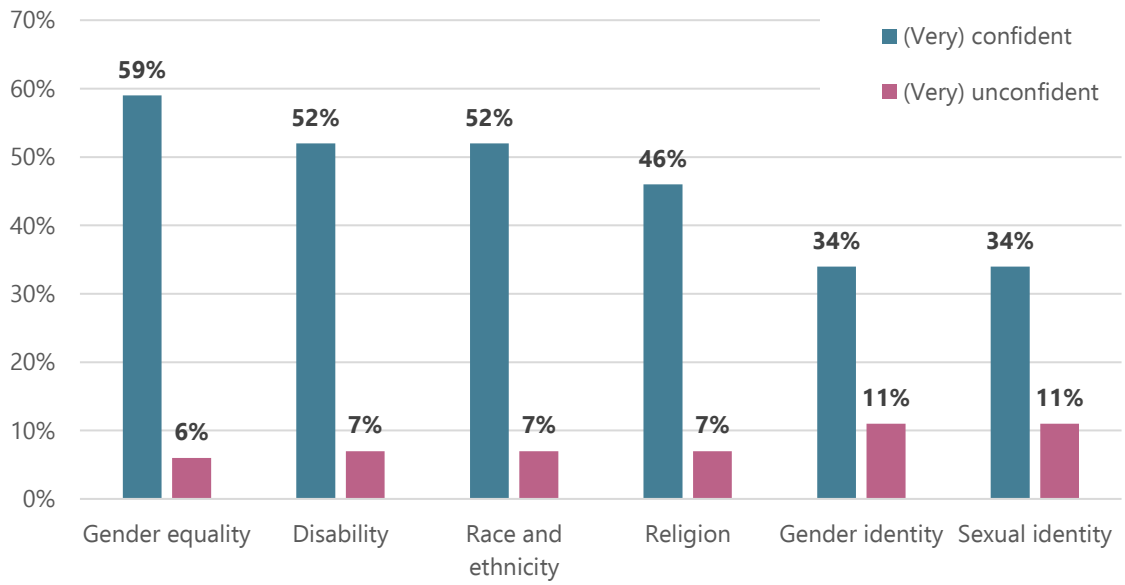
521 UK educators across all education levels took part in the survey, of which 62% identified as female (including trans female) and 36% as male (including trans male). 87% came from a white ethnic background, 5% were Asian, 3% Black, 2% mixed and 4% identified with an 'Other' ethnic group.

DE&I CONFIDENCE OF EDUCATORS

Firstly, we asked educators to indicate how confident they felt talking to students about a variety of DE&I-related topics, on a scale from 1=very unconfident to 7=very confident.

DE&I confidence of educators



Question: For each of these issues around diversity & inclusion, please indicate how confident you feel talking to students about them. [Scale from 1-7 with 1=very unconfident, 4=neither confident nor unconfident, 7=very confident; combined metric reported: Bottom2 values (1,2) as '(very) unconfident' & Top2 values (6,7) as '(very) confident']; n=521

The graph shows that our sample was ***most self-assured*** with regard to **gender equality**: 59% of educators indicated they were (very) confident talking to students about this topic, with only 6% saying they were (very) unconfident.

Given the gender structure, not just of our sample, but also the national school teacher body , this finding is highly plausible. About 70% of all UK school teachers are female,[4] and as such they are likely to be able to talk from their own experiences about gender equality issues more comfortably. 62% of female educators in our sample said they were (very) confident compared with only 51% of male educators.

The focus of their role also seems to have an impact on educators' level of self-assuredness with regard to the DE&I topics surveyed. Those who only taught reported being less confident compared to those who also had additional responsibilities:

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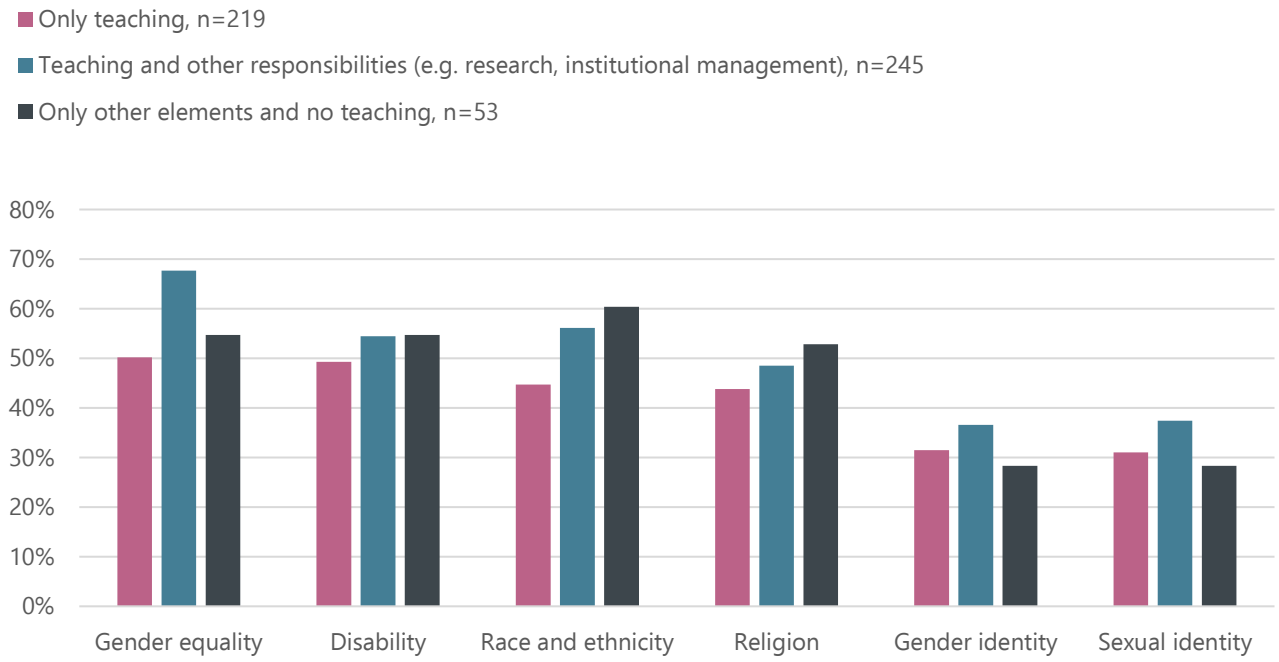
Confidence by role focus/Top2 confidence



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This also seems plausible, as educators who are involved in institutional management or research are more exposed to institutional policy and regulation, and thus are likely also to be more tuned into DE&I.

What our sample was ***least self-assured*** talking to students about was **gender identity and sexual identity**, which could be due to the fact that these topics are at the centre of a contentious debate about self-identification.[5] Only 34% of educators indicated they felt (very) confident, while 11% were (very) unconfident.

By comparison, our 52% had a (very) high confidence level with regard to having a conversation with students about **race and ethnicity**. This is the topic that the following sections are going to focus on. Consulting with World Afro Day, a Community Interest Company educating the public about Afro hair, equality and identity, we explored the issue of Afro hair discrimination.

AFRO HAIR DISCRIMINATION

According to the 2010 Equality Act, based on certain 'protected characteristics' – sex, race, disability, religion or belief, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, pregnancy or maternity – it is unlawful to discriminate against a person by treating them less favourably. **Provisions for race currently include colour, nationality, and ethnic or national origins, but hair is not explicitly mentioned in the Act.[6] The legislation also does not 'deal specifically with school uniform or other aspects of appearance such as hair colour and style',[7] which is problematic given that 'hair type is intrinsic to specific racial groups'.[8]**

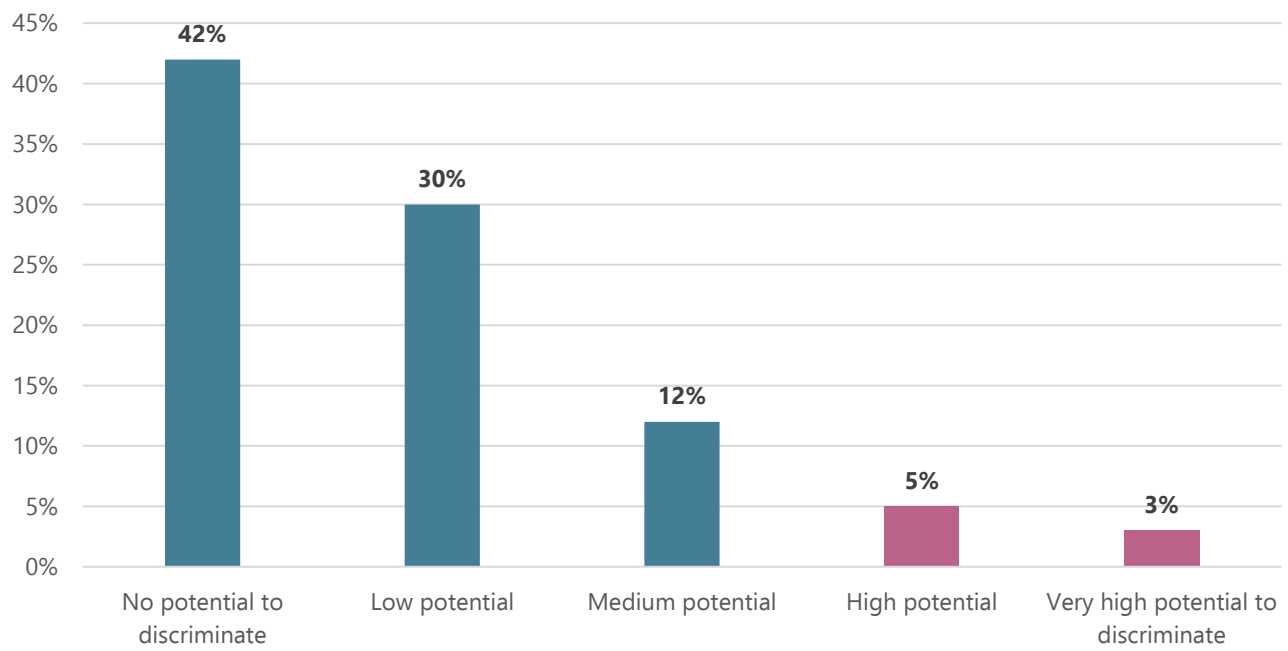
So, whilst implicitly addressed by the Act, there is a lack of explicit guidance and regulation with regard to Afro hair. This indicates what World Afro Day's Hair Equality Report (2019) describes as a 'growing disparity between the law and school policy and practice towards Afro hair'.[8]

A REAL CASE OF AFRO HAIR DISRIMINATION

One potential symptom of this disparity in the UK is a series of incidents in which pupils have been punished for their Afro hairstyles and schools have banned Afro hair[9],[10],[11] on the basis of their uniform policies.

Our research suggests that this may be a **blind spot for educators: only 8% of our educator sample thought that school uniform policies had a high or very high potential to discriminate** against students in regard to their race or ethnic background:

School uniform policy: Assumed potential for racial discrimination



Question: Thinking about your school's uniform policy, to what extent does it have the potential to discriminate in regard to...? [Scale from 1-5 with 1=No potential to discriminate and 5=Very high potential to discriminate]; n=414

While this study used relatively small sub-sample sizes, there seems to be a **relationship between age and attitudes:** Older educators were less likely to be sensitive to this issue: 13% aged 40 or younger assumed a high/very high discriminatory potential in school uniform policies with regard to race, compared with only 6% of those that were 41 years and older. This could be problematic as older teachers are more likely to be part of School Leadership and involved in setting the policies.

Also unsurprisingly, **Black, Asian and mixed ethnic** respondents were more likely to see a high/very high discriminatory potential (23% vs 7% white).

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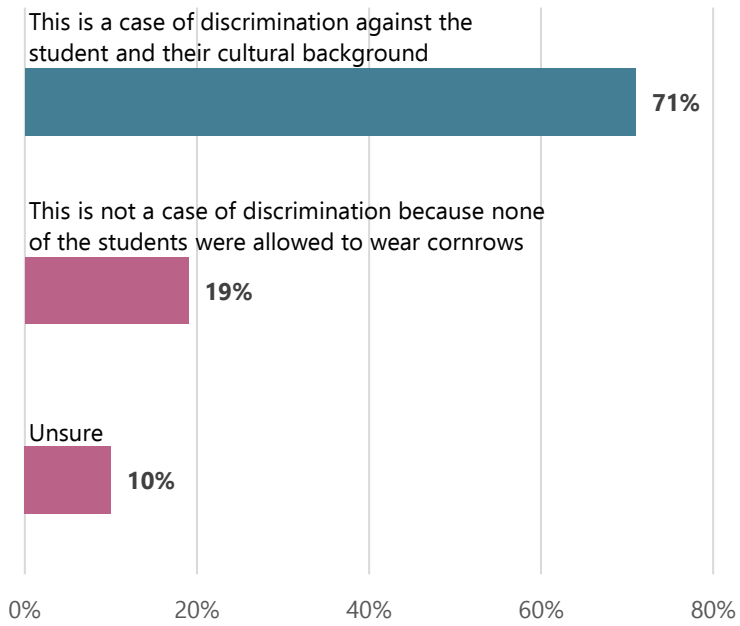
Scenario about Afro hair discrimination

We devised a **scenario to test educators' ability to identify Afro hair discrimination** specifically. This was based on a real case from 2011 that we chose because it's less likely that respondents would recall this incident compared to a more recent one. In this case, a school refused to let a boy wear cornrow braids because of its hair policy, which a court ruled as 'unlawful, indirect racial discrimination', adding that school authorities 'must consider allowing other boys to wear cornrows if it is *"a genuine family tradition based on cultural and social reasons"*'.[12]

A student from an African Caribbean family is admitted to school X, but on their first day is refused entry because they are wearing their hair in cornrows. This hairstyle is traditional in their family, as in many African Caribbean families. However, the uniform policy of the school deems it inappropriate and hence non-permissible for any student to wear their hair in cornrows. Please choose which of these statements you feel is true in this scenario.



Close to one-third of educators wrongly thought the scenario did not constitute a case of discrimination (19%) or were unsure about it (10%). While 78% of our female sample were correct in assuming it was unlawful, only 57% of male educators made this assumption.

LACK OF DE&I TRAINING

Apart from the Equality Act not being explicit about hair under its race provisions, one key reason why such a big proportion of our educator sample couldn't identify the incident in the scenario as racial discrimination appears to be the **lack of knowledge about how to navigate DE&I in the education setting.**

76% of educators in our sample had not received training about how the Equality Act applies to school uniform and appearance policies in general, a figure which rises to 88% when it comes to the application of the Act to Afro hairstyles in particular.

The result is a problematic status quo, in which educators are, as our research shows, relatively confident talking to students about DE&I topics, including racism, but confused when it comes to acting on concrete DE&I incidents.

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This **confusion** is reflected in some of the comments of educators who indicated that they were 'unsure' whether the scenario presented a case of discrimination:

"This is tricky because there may be a conflict between personal customs and uniform policy and/or practical considerations."

"It's a v[ery] sensitive subject which can be argued [from] both sides."

"Rules set by school mean children agree to follow when they go there but law changes all the time so no idea what is right or not."

"Depends on the number of students of other nationalities at the school."

CONCLUSION

We found that, overall, UK educators were relatively confident when it comes to talking to students about a range of DE&I topics. Whilst this is an encouraging finding, our research indicates that this confidence might not be grounded in sufficient knowledge about how to navigate anti-discrimination law in the education context, which has its own set of appearance policies, as the case of Afro hair discrimination shows.

52% of our sample were (very) confident talking to students about race, yet 29% could not identify an incident of Afro hair discrimination, and 88% had not received any training with regard to application of the Equality Act to Afro hairstyles.

The fact that hair is not specifically mentioned in the Act 'has created a grey area that is confusing for teachers. While Afro hair technically falls under the definition of a "protected characteristic", without being explicitly named, it is all too easily discriminated against'.[13]

There are some positive developments, such as UK Education Unions: ASCL, NAHT, NASUWT, NEU and Voice Community working with World Afro Day to end Afro hair discrimination in schools. Also, the Halo Code,[14] is the UK's first Afro hair pledge for education settings and workplaces, and promises that members of the black community can wear all Afro hairstyles without restriction or judgement.

But what really seems needed, apart from potentially amending the law to explicitly include Afro hair in the Equality Act,[15] is **new DE&I training for all teachers:** As World Afro Day's Hair Equality Report (2019) points out, Afro hair penalisation based on school policies appears to have increased significantly in just one generation, stating that among "adults who had experienced [hair discrimination'] problems at school, only 27% said that hair policy was an issue compared to 46% for today's children". Whilst negative attitudes towards Afro hair were more widespread in the past, the problem lies in the increase of *written* hair policies, resulting in more frequent punishment of pupils for 'inappropriate' hairstyles.

That's why it is crucial that educators are given the necessary knowledge and resources to navigate DE&I confidently and apply the law correctly in their policies and practices – with regard to race, as well as all other DE&I-related topics.

ABOUT SHIFT INSIGHT

Since 2002, we have grown to become a leading research consultancy – originally focused solely on education, but then expanding into the complementary areas of Membership and Sustainability, alongside Learning. DE&I is a key part of social sustainability for us. Shift Insight is an anti-racist organisation, committed to encouraging diversity and eliminating discrimination in both its role as an employer and as a provider of services. We are proud of the role that research can have in DE&I and aware that there is continual work to be done to improve our practice. We have a dedicated Diversity and Inclusion officer and we are a disability confident employer and proud B Corp™ member.

Shift Sustainability employees are experts in market research and consultation. We use research methods geared towards sustainability issues, for example using bespoke frameworks and advanced methods to understand what matters most to stakeholders and consumers and behaviour change approaches to understand and impact sustainable behaviours. The projects we work on are key in identifying and addressing global and local challenges. In this age of shifting mindsets and competing priorities, where success comes to those who listen and adapt, we give organisations the evidence and insight they need to make a real impact.

We are members of the Market Research Society and European Society for Opinion and Market Research. We are also registered with the Information Commissioner's Office and inform them of any personal information held. Our researchers fully abide by:

- The Data Protection Act 2018 and GDPR.
- The ICC/ESOMAR International Code on Market and Social Research.
- The MRS Code of Conduct.

We have a strong interest in topics around equity, diversity and inclusion, both as primary and secondary areas of investigation.

To find out more about us, please visit our website: https://shift-insight.co.uk

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