21. Reflecting on Teaching Interculturalism and Diversity to Teachers in First and Second Level Education in Ireland

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Introduction

Interculturalism means more than just respecting ethnic diversity. It is an all-encompassing concept which acknowledges that diversity is normal and normality is diverse in schools and in society (Kenny, 2009). Interculturalism adopts an anti-bias (Derman-Sparks & A.B.C. Task Force 1989) curriculum which is:

an active/activist approach to challenging prejudice, stereotyping, bias, and the “isms”. In a society in which institutional structures create and maintain sexism, racism, and handicappism. It is not sufficient to be non biased (and also highly unlikely), nor is it sufficient to be an observer. It is necessary for each individual to actively intervene, to challenge and counter the personal and institutional behaviors that perpetuate oppression (p.3).

Irish legislation prohibits discrimination on nine grounds and these are also the aspects of diversity that the intercultural guidelines (NCCA, 2007) focus on: gender, age, marital status, family status, sexual orientation, Traveller status, disability, ‘race’ and religion. Respect for diversity is enshrined in Irish laws and policies, but teachers in first and second level education may be unaware of the existence of these policies or their implications for informing pedagogical practices. This paper will give a brief resume of current policies on interculturalism and will consider data from the 2011 census of population. The concept of interculturalism has built on and has further developed the concept of multiculturalism to include all forms of diversity and to eschew heterosexism, prejudice (against Travellers), racism, disableism, ageism, homophobia, sectarianism etc. This means that teachers at every level need to do their own identity work, recognise their own prejudices and promote interculturalism in the classroom otherwise they may unwittingly ‘other’ those who are different than them.

The purpose of this paper is to explain the concept of interculturalism as it applies to education policy in Ireland and to examine ethnic diversity in Irish society. Data from the most recent census (2011) will be presented. The paper will conclude with my own personal experiences of teaching interculturalism modules to undergraduates and post-graduates.

Ethnic diversity in Irish society

Historically Ireland experienced waves of immigration, the Celts, Vikings, Normans and the English; Ireland was never a mono-cultural society (Lydon 1998); Travellers have been part of Irish society since the 12th century (Danaher et al. 2009). According to Huber (2012: p.22):

Rare were those societies where the ways of thinking, acting, and feeling were limited to a “one and only” way, if at all they ever existed or exist today. The belief in homogenous societies is due to a failure to recognise existing diversity rather than to a total absence of diversity.

That said, in the Celtic Tiger era, Ireland experienced a wave of immigration unprecedented in the history of Modern Ireland, consequently Irish society and schools became more ethnically diverse. According to the Department of Education’s Statistics Office (2011) newcomer children constitute 12% of the primary school population and 9% of pupils in post-primary schools (Department of Education and Skills, 2010).

Irish Census 2011

Ireland is still attracting immigrants/migrants as outlined in the last census (2011), which revealed that the number of non-Irish nationals has increased by 124,624 persons, since the 2006 census (this is a 30% increase, from 419,733 to 544,357). The greatest increase has been amongst Polish nationals whose numbers increased by 93.7%: from 63,276 to 122,585. That said the vast majority of persons usually resident in the State were born in Ireland.
The total number of persons resident in Ireland on census night 2011 was 4,525,281; of whom Irish people made up 86.8% (Central Statistics Office 2012).

Ethnic groups that showed the largest increase were those already well-established in Ireland. The fastest growing groups were Romanians (+110%), Indians (+91%), Polish (+83%), Latvians (+43%) and Lithuanians (+40%). In the year preceding the census day in 2011, 53,267 persons immigrated into the State. The majority were non-nationals, of whom the two leading immigrant groups were from the UK (4,549) and Poland (3,825). Of these immigrants, 36.8% were Irish born (Central Statistics Office 2012). Travellers were enumerated at 29,573, this may be underestimated as a recent health survey of Travellers revealed that the Traveller population in Ireland is circa 36,500 (Kenny 2012).

Intercultural Guidelines for primary and post-primary schools

The European Council emphasises the importance of intercultural competence and dialogue, exchange and education in building a common European future based on values and principles, so that human rights and democracy are safeguarded (Huber 2012).

Today, intercultural understanding and intercultural competence are more important than ever because they make it possible for us to address the root causes of some of the most virulent problems of today’s societies in the form of misunderstandings across cultural, socio-cultural, ethnic and other lines: discrimination, racism, hate speech and so on (Huber 2012, p.5).

The Council of Europe argue that there is a great need for education so that intercultural competence can be developed, learned and maintained throughout life. They go so far as to say that intercultural competence is at the heart of education. But how can teachers become interculturally competent? Irish policy documents have embraced the concept of interculturalism and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessments have issued guidelines and exemplars for first and second level education.

NCCA Intercultural Guidelines


Ethnicity is the ethnic group or groups that people identify with or feel they belong to. ... a measure of cultural affiliation, as opposed to race, ancestry, nationality or citizenship. ... people can belong to more than one ethnic group. An ethnic group [has] some or all of the following characteristics: a common proper name one or more elements of common culture which need not be specified, but may include religion, customs, or language, unique community of interests, feelings and actions, a shared sense of common origins or ancestry, and a common geographic origin (Statistics New Zealand n.d.) (Smith 1986).

Individual and Institutional Racism

The NCCA guidelines (2005 p.15) draw links between individual and institutional racist attitudes and practices. To counter racism and racist practices the guidelines encourage teachers to develop the capacity of children to recognise inequality, racism and prejudice so that they can challenge it in their own lives. Teachers are encouraged to develop an appreciation of the richness of diversity of cultures. The guidelines (p. 13) build on the UNESCO Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice and state that intercultural education is for all children regardless of their minority or majority ethnic identity. Interculturalism needs to be embedded in all aspects of the curriculum and should not be seen as an ‘add on’. Representations of other cultures should highlight ordinary and everyday activities rather than taking a heroes and holiday approach. Textbooks should be interrogated for stereotypes.

The guidelines describe institutional racism as discriminatory provisions in legislation, regulations or other formal practices. It includes: indirect discriminations; a lack of positive action to promote equality; a lack of professional expertise or training in dealing with diversity in the organisation; a lack of systematic data gathering on the impact of policies on minority groups;
a lack of workable facilities for consultation and listening to minority groups (NCCA, 2005, p. 16). A requirement that on the surface may appear non-discriminatory could have negative and adverse effects on a group or class of people for example schools which prioritise places for siblings may unwittingly discriminate against new-comers and children from the Traveller community.

Prejudice against Travellers is still rife in Irish society and does not appear to be improving (Tormey & Gleeson 2012). As long ago as 1991, the Task Force Report (1995: p. 81 found that in Ireland, ‘the single most discriminated against ethnic group are the Travelling People’ (Task Force 1995)(Pavee Point Travellers Centre 2005). Even in this period of immigration Traveller racism is the most virulent form of racist discrimination in Ireland (McVeigh 1997)(Fanning 2003).

Evidence of Irish racism
According to Smyth et al. (2009) formal measures have been put in place to support the social integration of newcomer students in half of primary schools. Although relations between Irish students and newcomer children are on the whole positive, there is some evidence of segregation in friendship patterns and some incidences of bullying based on ethnicity (Smyth et al. 2009). Devine (2009) explored how ethnic and gender identity mediated children’s interaction with one another in a multi-ethnic primary school. She argued that power is exercised through competing discourses of what is considered normal and what is considered ‘other’ in children’s relationships (Devine 2009).

Even though the intercultural guidelines are designed to ameliorate racism, Bryan (2009: 298) suggests that they may have the opposite effect. She argues that racial inequality is more likely to be reproduced through current policies because the guidelines are situated within a nationalistic framework which ‘other’ racial minorities (Bryan 2009). She calls it a form of ‘symbolic violence’ that ‘reproduces and masks relationships of power in society while disguising it as egalitarian’ (Bryan, 2009: 298). Whilst on the one hand the discourse is about social inclusion and the welcoming of newcomers, it simultaneously constructs diversity as being abnormal, new and alien to Irish society. ‘Ultimately it is a discourse which merely bestows a conditional passive national belonging upon racialized minorities, while simultaneously entrenching power relations between the acceptor and those whom they accept (Bryan, 2009: 312).

Tormey and Gleeson (2012) conducted a large-scale quantitative study (n= 4,970) of post primary school students and found that students reported low levels of social distance from Black African Immigrants, Muslims and Eastern Europeans, but high levels of social distance from Travellers. They suggest that these positive attitudes to ethnic minorities may be due to school programmes that focus on global justice and inequalities. Attitudes were gendered with girls showing higher levels of tolerance towards ethnic minorities and boys showing much higher negative attitudes. The authors recommend that opportunities for personal and social development be given much greater prominence in schools (Tormey & Gleeson 2012).

Teaching Interculturalism
For the past three years, I have taught modules on interculturalism to undergraduate and post-graduate students teaching in different sectors: early childhood education, primary and secondary teaching. I find that the guidelines are a useful framework for scaffolding the module. They can be seen as the tip of the iceberg allowing deeper sociological concepts and theories to be explored and they allow for an exploration of the ways in which education systems can unwittingly reproduce societal inequalities and social exclusion:

1. Gender: sexism, feminist theories, masculinities, hidden curriculum
2. ‘Race’: identity and belonging, individual and institutional racism, ethnic minorities and education, English as a second language, stigma, prejudice, symbolic interactionism
3. Disability: segregation and mainstreaming, the individual and social models of disability, labeling theory, differentiated curriculum, individual education plans, charity approach & human rights approach
4. Marital and family status: diversity in family types, parents as partners in their children’s education, communicating with parents or guardians.
5. Religion: religious diversity, practices and beliefs, sociological theories of religion: Durkheim, Marx, Weber, religious fundamentalism, sectarianism
6. Travellers: nomadism and sedentarism.
7. Age: ageism, mixed age classrooms,
8. Sexual orientation: heteronormativity, homophobia, gay and lesbian experiences of the educational system.
This list is by no means exhaustive and many other topics and theories are also explored. At all times teachers must reflect on their own personal experiences, values and practices in the classroom. The types of questions that are raised include: How do certain groups in society become stigmatised? How do you ensure social inclusion of children with disabilities or additional learning needs in your classroom? There is only one race: the human race – do you agree? What is the hidden agenda in terms of gender? How can you challenge gender stereotypes? How do you deal with a child who is being bullied because his parents are lesbian?

Does your school encourage same sex partners to attend the debutante’s dance? How can you encourage settled children and Traveller children to play together? Why have the efforts to educate Traveller, nomad and migrant children been a nearly universal failure? (Remy, Leder, 2009 cited in Danaher, Kenny and Remy Leder). At play time, the children in your school yard tend to stay in ethnic groups: the Nigerians play with other Nigerians, Eastern Europeans play together and Irish children play together. What can you do as a teacher to encourage the children to mix? Does your school have a policy on interculturalism? What images are portrayed on your school walls? What do you do with a little girl who will only drink out of a pink cup? A little boy wants to dress up in girls clothes what do you do?

Developing Good Practice in Schools

Students have responded well to this module and produced innovative and creative papers on all ways of embracing diversity; two students have completed minor dissertations on aspects of interculturalism. In reviewing the literature on the topic Smyth et al (2009) suggest that in effective schools, teachers listened to and learnt from students and their parents and tried to develop empathy with their students and had links with the local communities who could help with interpreting and translation of language (Smyth et al. 2009). They had clear procedures for racism. Ethnic monitoring took place to ensure that students were achieving equally. Principals take strong leadership roles and develop a proactive strategy to pre-empt misunderstandings and cultural conflict (Smyth et al. 2009 p.35). A Toolkit for Diversity in the Primary School (2007) (a cross border collaborative project) was launched to enable schools to develop more inclusive practices and environments (NCCA 2007). It defines an inclusive school as one which has a welcoming ethos for children and parents; it identifies staff role and responsibilities; it has a supportive admissions procedure, it ensures that staff have access to continuing professional development (CPD) to help to design programmes which are tailored to the needs of students. An inclusive school prepares children for the arrival of new pupils, it uses methods of assessment that allow students to demonstrate their knowledge and skill and finally an inclusive school allocates funds for suitable resources (NCCA, 2007, p.10). Devine argues that schools should develop a charter of social relations based on respect for all forms of diversity in peer and pupil-teacher relations. Parents and children from majority and minority ethnic groups should be included. She recommends that teachers do their own identity work such as: What does it mean to be Irish? What are the norms I adhere to? (Devine 2009: 71).

Conclusion

Conspicuous by its absence from the guidelines is any discussion of the role of social class, poverty and economic disadvantage in reproducing societal inequalities. Clancy notes the relationship between social class of origin and social class of destination of students (Clancy 1986) and states: the persistence of marked inequalities in the attainment of valuable educational credentials raises serious questions about the meritocratic assumptions which underpins the public funding of education (Clancy 1986, p. 131).

As Bryan (2009) rightly points out we cannot put the entire burden of responsibility on teachers’ shoulders to counter all the prejudice and inequalities in society. That said teachers do have a part to play in countering negative attitudes towards prejudice in classrooms, the schoolyard, the school and the wider community. It behoves teachers to become familiar with the intercultural guidelines and to incorporate the exemplars into their everyday pedagogical practices. Although this paper has highlighted the issue of ethnicity, it is important to reiterate that interculturalism is about embracing different types of diversity (age, gender, religion, sexual orientation, disability, marital and family status, and Travellers). People can have multiple and intersecting identities for example a woman has a gender identity and could have two ethnic identities (e.g. be a Traveller and Irish), have a disability, be elderly and widowed. Therefore in order to create truly inclusive schools and inclusive societies we need to embrace more than forty shades of green.
References


Pavee Point Travellers Centre, 2005. *Assimilation Policies and Outcomes; Travellers’ Experiences Report on a research project commissioned by Pavee Point Travellers’ Centre*, Available at: the single most discriminated against ethnic group are the Travelling People.


