

Exploring Student-Teacher Attitudes to Interculturalism

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INTRODUCTION

Ireland has become a more culturally diverse, heterogeneous society. The term 'Irishness' has been redefined, encompassing many more than just 'White Middle-class Catholics' (Parker-Jenkins and Masterson 2013). According to the most recent census, the Irish demographic comprises of 535,475 non-Irish nationals, and more than 104,784 citizens with dual-nationalities (CSO 2017). With this increasingly diversity, one must consider how the Irish primary school system is responding, particularly when its fundamental aim outlines the need 'to celebrate the uniqueness of the child' and 'the development of the full potential of every child' (NCCA 1999, pp.16-18).

The need to ensure adequate inclusive methodologies to accommodate for the increasingly diverse Irish classrooms, requires reflection. This research project wishes to determine the outlooks, attitudes, and confidence of student-teachers towards promoting interculturalism in their future classrooms. Given that student-teachers are exposed to the most contemporary research in the field of education as a result of their on-going studies, the outlook of this cohort may be of interest to educators in the field of Initial Teacher Education (ITE). In exploring their engagement with

interculturalism, it is hoped that areas which may require reconsideration will be highlighted to ensure that future teachers have the tools and supports they need to address interculturalism.

CONTEXT

Interculturalism has recently dominated the discourse of many different domains; judicial, societal, and educational. Due to the demographical changes experienced on both national and international levels, countries have been forced to reconsider statutory regulations to ensure compliance with basic human rights, and that each person, regardless of race, ethnicity, or demographic, is afforded the same basic civil liberties as the host populates. Interculturalism in the context of education is the notion that “all ethnicities be valued and respected, and require students to develop contact with, and knowledge of, communities who are different from themselves” (Antonsich 2015, p.478).

Since the beginning of the Celtic Tiger era, the demographic in Ireland has become heterogenous and culturally diverse (CSO 2017). Consequently, additional resources were put in place by the government to support the integration and inclusion of children from different ethnicities and cultural backgrounds in Irish primary classrooms. EAL teachers and support plans were introduced to schools to address the rising classroom diversity (Department of Education and Skills 2012). Furthermore, guidelines published by various bodies, such as the INTO *Intercultural Education in the Primary School: Guidelines for Teachers* (NCCA, 2005) and *Towards a Framework for Intercultural Education in Irish Classrooms* (Heran and Tormey 2002) which aimed to provide guidance and support to teachers in promoting intercultural education. After the economic downturn in 2009, reduced funding resulted in a significant reduction of support teachers and the sole responsibility of catering for additional needs returned to the classroom teacher (Department of Education and Skills 2012).

Findings from a PISA Report (2009) revealed that the academic success of migrant children in the areas literacy and numeracy, as determined by standardised testing, was below average. Research indicated that recognition of and response to intercultural education was inadequate in the Irish educational context (Devine 2009a; Devine 2009b; Smyth et al 2009). Research focused on the effect of classroom teachers on the implementation of intercultural education with some authors highlighting the need for classroom teachers to be cognisant of inexplicit exclusionary methods; those which can be manifested in teaching strategies, curricular material and a teacher’s lack of self-awareness (Ryan 2003). Devine (2009) highlighted the need to create culturally aware learning spaces in which cultural stereotypes are not perpetuated, and sensitivity is developed for classroom diversity,

to ensure the establishment of inclusive classrooms, “built upon an appreciation and respect for the established social and cultural values of unique societies” (Rose 2010, p.3).

Some studies have given consideration for student-teachers’ conceptions of their role and have investigated the influence of dispositional factors, (openness to diversity and self-awareness), and expositional factors (intercultural experiences), on the creation of intercultural classroom environments (Garmon 2004). In this sense, ITE can play a crucial role in developing reflective and self-aware teachers. The literature refers to the influence education can have on enabling student-teachers “to gather information, think critically, reflect, converse, and assess before making ideological decisions” (Middleton 2002, p.356) and to become critically aware of cultural dominance, power relations and inexplicit exclusionary methods in classroom environments.

METHODOLOGY

Data for this research project was qualitative in nature and gathered by means of semi-structured interviews of a duration of approximately 20-30minutes. Purposive sampling was used to recruit nine participants. All participants were enrolled in an initial teacher education programme at the time of interview. Due to the nature of their educational programme, participants presented with many differing demographical traits, in terms of age, county of origins, previous employments and life experience. Six participants identified as ‘female’ and three as ‘male’. Participants were from varying locations around Ireland. By focusing on this particular sample, it was hoped that a more accurate and encompassing overview would be achieved. Interestingly, while all participants had completed at least three formal school placements, some had not yet experienced classrooms with children from ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds.

Interview data was analysed using thematic analysis whereby transcripts were decoded and encoded to identify the prominent thematic findings. A mixture of in vivo codes and descriptive codes were used for this purpose. The process of data analysis was guided by the approach advocated by Creswell et al. (2007) and influenced by the instructional process of Saldana (2009). Having gathered the relevant data, five main themes were identified as being the most significant factors impacting the outlook of student-teachers towards intercultural education.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As outlined by Smith (2000), a teacher's own personal experience with interculturalism and diversity, can have a significant impact on how they approach culturally diverse classrooms. One participant claimed that because of having interacted with multicultural settings in their own personal lives, entering a classroom with children from a diversity of cultural backgrounds did not incur any concern and enabled them to become more aware of promoting an inclusive environment. They said;

Through soccer I would have had a lot of experience of it [cultural diversity] aright...because of that when I walked into a classroom that was very diverse, it was nothing new to me, so I was able to just get on with it (student-teacher).

Other participants indicated that their personal experiences enabled them to empathise with "the other" which they believed benefited the creation of an intercultural classroom. However, the data also indicated that certain participants who had little or no personal experiences with diversity, still had an awareness of the impact of the dominant culture, and how to ensure that all children were included regardless of ethnicity.

Having requested participants to outline their experience in intercultural classrooms, all but one identified as having encountered and taught in classrooms with culturally diverse students. The findings indicate that initial exposure to such settings resulted in student-teachers feeling unprepared, lacking in confidence and uncertain of how best to provide for the needs of their class. Interestingly, although all candidates had completed at least one full semester of college (in some cases three) prior to this experience, none felt they had a thorough understanding of multiculturalism or interculturalism prior to these placements. Some participants indicated that they did not feel adequately prepared to address intercultural issues should they arise on placement. Some of the participants recall interculturalism being discussed in their programme, "*it was brought to our attention*", while one participant failed to remember the guidance given; "*I've had three semesters of training and I don't know if I've heard the word mentioned once*". Two participants indicated they had since acquired a more in-depth knowledge of the interculturalism as a result of independent research.

Lack of explicit guidance and instruction on providing for children in these classrooms were identified in the data as being the biggest concern for participants. Participants made various suggestions about how student-teachers could be supported for teaching in culturally diverse classrooms. ITE programmes could offer compulsory modules, or subject-specific lectures pertaining to interculturalism. Some participants stated that the information provided in guidelines and policies

is not enough, rather strategies and resources for culturally diverse classrooms need to be explicitly explored. Participants suggested that subject-specific lectures and experts in the field could deliver formal training. One person said:

I believe there should be a specific module for intercultural education and intercultural diversity. I always think it's very easy to point out that there [are] intercultural guidelines and there is paperwork and policy out there, but I feel there is nothing better than actually sitting down and discussing it (student-teacher).

Beyond ITE, participants highlighted the need for specific Continuous Professional Development (CPD) courses in the area of intercultural education. These could provide the necessary information to practicing teachers, with one participant suggesting it be incorporated in the mandatory Croke Park hours that teachers are required to attend. Moreover, it was suggested that intercultural education be made available in the form of a booklet for quick reference, in the same manner as certain subjects are addressed with the boundaries of SPHE.

The findings of the research explored some of the attitudes and experiences of student-teachers prior to their entry into the professional field. While this research is limited in nature, the results are nevertheless relevant and demanding of our reflection. As the demographic of the Irish society becomes increasingly heterogeneous, it is imperative that teachers feel confident to address the needs of intercultural classrooms. Ensuring that children are accommodated for, regardless of ethnic diversity, is forefront to safeguarding curricular aims. As stated by Smyth, "supporting teachers towards more differentiated classroom methods as well as promoting a more positive school climate would enhance the academic and social development of newcomer and Irish students alike" (2009, p.204). The data from this project suggests that additional supports are necessary for teachers. Much of the data highlights the need for compulsory lectures and modules to provide practical strategies and knowledge of resources to student-teachers before they encounter culturally diverse classrooms.

While formal education is imperative, a teacher's disposition and experience can also affect their ability to provide an inclusive classroom environment. This research project finds that only some of the participants had experienced interactions with cultural diversity prior to their experience as teacher of such classrooms. There is little evidence in the data to suggest awareness of one's cultural privilege and dominant-culture upbringing, which is stated by Middleton (2002) as being the one of the biggest difficulties in preparing student-teachers for interculturalism. However, the data does suggest an on-going process of self-reflection practiced by many of the participants, referring to the

need for reserving their own cultural beliefs to ensure the creation of an open and accepting environment. Baldwin et al. (2007) outline that this is the most effective manner in which teachers can question their preconceptions and subliminal beliefs, enabling them to interrogate their methodologies and develop a consciousness for how best to ensure and implement intercultural education. Empathy for 'the other' and a willingness to provide as effectively as possible for children's needs was present amongst participants. Interestingly, one participant highlighted the danger of over emphasising 'the other', a belief that may serve to alienate certain students even further, enhancing the gap between 'them and us' (Parker-Jenkins et al. 2017).

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research project was to offer a current insight into the perceptions of student-teachers towards intercultural education. Having received the most current and topical information available, the research endeavoured to investigate this cohort's outlooks of teaching in diverse classrooms. Student-teachers reported highly positive experiences of teaching in culturally diverse classrooms, however they too highlighted shortcomings in their formal education on interculturalism. With limited resources offered to schools to address the growing diversity, classroom teachers are facing greater demands than ever before. Ensuring they have the proper and sufficient support to address these issues is crucial to ensure the equal access of all students to a quality primary school education. Further research in this area may consider extending the limitations of this project. It is hoped that the results of this project may contribute to the discourse on ITE and intercultural education and focus on providing student-teachers with CPD, education and resources to support them in their professional career.

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