

Diversity in education

Profession, Teacher



Based on your experience as a participant in the Alternative Educational Experience explore the challenges presented by diversity to the 21st century teacher in the Irish educational system. Based on your experience as a participant in the Alternative Educational Experience explore the challenges presented by diversity to the 21st century teacher in the Irish educational system. Over the years the traditional Irish classroom has undergone a significant change in terms of diversity. Due to factors such as immigration, economical changes, identification of learning disabilities, etc. the modern teacher has many more challenges presented to them by diversity than in previous years. We, as teachers, are given the task of “ educating people to respect, celebrate and recognise the normality of diversity in all parts of human life. ” (Lecture 2, Week 1.) But before we can do this as teachers we must truly understand what diversity is. The concept of diversity is quite broad but is commonly defined as having the following attributes: “ Encompassing acceptance and respect. It means understanding that each individual is unique, and recognizing our individual differences. These include race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical abilities, religious beliefs, political beliefs, or other ideologies. It is the exploration of these differences in a safe, positive, and nurturing environment. It is about understanding each other and moving beyond simple tolerance to embracing and celebrating the rich dimensions of diversity contained within each individual” (University of Oregon, 1999). Diversity in the classroom is of great importance in the development of a young person’s identity, learning and overall development into an independent individual but it also must be noted that problems such as

racism, discrimination, learning disabilities in the classroom can be detrimental to the pupil. “ Teachers are faced with the task to respond instantaneously to situations such as the above, but are also confronted with numerous obstacles to doing so appropriately” (Hanko, 1990, p1). Therefore as part as of my training as a student teacher I participated in the Alternative Education Experience (A. E. E.) programme. This saw me venture off to an alternative education establishment, my local community training centre, other than the traditional school setting to broaden my understanding of the challenges presented by diversity. The centre offers early school leavers to learn the necessary life skills such as mathematics, welding, woodwork, home economics, computer skills and so on. The centre employs 3 full-time staff and 7 other part-time teachers. It was while observing the various classes in this alternative education establishment I received a valuable insight to the many challenges that diversity presents to the modern day teacher. The first challenge presented by diversity that I would like to highlight is that of social class and the whole idea of being disadvantaged socially and economically, also known as the “ socio-economic status. ” As stated in our lecture notes the “ socio-economic” status is the single most significant casual factor in relation to (both) achievement and underachievement, (a) stronger predictor of attainment than ability. ” (Lecture 6, Week 3). During my A. E. E. placement, after getting to know some of the pupils, I couldn’t help but notice that the majority of the pupils enrolled in the training centre were from the semi-skilled or unskilled working class backgrounds. “ Findings on socio-economic background indicated that from the end of primary schooling up to third-level education,

the representation of students from the lower socio-economic groups decreased, while the representation of those from the higher groups increased" (Drudy and Lynch, 1993, p142). The pupils enrolled at the training centre were all male and between the ages of 17 and 28 years. They majority were early school leavers who said they had no interest in school when they were younger. The reason for their enrollment at the centre was that of unemployment and the need to learn specific skills that they failed to learn when in 2nd level education. In order to gain employment in the current economic climate these key skills are essential. This is also supported by Drudy's studies on the relationship between schools and society by stating that " those most prone to unemployment are those who leave school with no qualifications..... are those who leave school early" (Drudy and Lynch, 1993, p145). This made me question why these pupils' are continuously being failed by the education system that is in place today. The first reason I could think of and was clearly evident at the centre, especially amongst the younger pupils, was a major lack of motivation due to the " ghetto culture" or social and cultural reproduction, " the process by which the features and attributes of a society or culture are passed on largely intact from one generation to another" (Corson, 1998, p8). This is a major challenge for teachers in a diverse classroom because if they cannot motivate these pupils or allow them to realize the potential that they have, they will slip through the cracks of the education system and add to the large number of early school leavers in this country. At the centre it was noted that pupils only had particular interests when it came to subjects. Participation levels in classes such as metal work were much higher than

that of mathematics. Their participation was due to possible future employment in the working class sector rather than that of gaining an education. As well as this the teachers' lack of understanding towards the pupils is a major factor in the classroom. All teachers would consider themselves a success of the education system, a concept that does not relate to these young people. These young people see themselves as failures, a resultant from poor performance in academics when in school, a lack of support from parents regarding education, etc. To help prevent these disadvantaged pupils from leaving school at a young age, it is our duty as teachers to encourage, relate to, and support them, to give them a chance to develop their learning further beyond what they think they are capable of. But the question is how do we do this? Are there alternative teaching methodologies that could have a greater effect on the learning of these disadvantaged pupils? Personally I do believe there are ways of reaching every pupil, but it will take a lot of time and practice in these circumstances before I can see any results for myself. Another challenge presented by diversity that all teachers are faced with is that of teaching in a multi-cultural classroom. In recent years, especially " during the Celtic Tiger period of economic boom, labour shortages in the Republic of Ireland allied with the expansion of the European Union resulted in rapid large-scale immigration and significant change in the student composition of Irish schools" (Darmody et al, 2011, p125). According to Best (2000, p156), " defining cultural development engages the classroom practitioner in a twofold process: first, the isolation of the phenomenon of cultural development and then the decision about methodology, or how this phenomenon might be promoted

through education. " Here Best highlights the two significant challenges that the 21st century teacher faces in the classroom when presented with a culturally diverse group. The first being that of finding a single meaning to the term culture as it can be quite broad so that we understand what culture is and what it stands for. Secondly is the designing and implication of various methodologies that incorporates the education of different cultures.

However, it is also very important for teachers to also recognize that " culture can be used to exclude socially" (Best, 2000, p157) in the classroom. Many cultures bring their own language and traditions. This can create a barrier amongst the pupil(s) and others of a different culture. During my teaching practice I had a class where there was one pupil who did not speak English as his first language. This created an obstacle for the pupil to participate fully in my lessons. However, lessons were purposefully altered to be more visual, as well as basic language spoken to that pupil to prevent him from falling behind the rest of the class. But this was only one pupil in a small class. Teachers across the country are faced with many diverse learners such as this and they must recognize this and adjust their teaching methodologies to incorporate these pupils into the lesson. Due to inadequate educating of Irish pupils in regarding the different cultures in Ireland, problems such as racism, discrimination and bullying can creep into the classroom through cultural reproduction as discussed earlier. Along with different cultures comes religion and beliefs. It is important to take the pupils various beliefs into consideration, especially when teaching subjects such as science and religion. Religion is a very sensitive topic and can very easily cause conflict in the classroom, and even in the community. It was noted

that during my AEE placement there was a rather large representation from the traveler community as well as one polish student. These pupils were treated just like any other pupil. However at times there was a language barrier between the other pupils and the polish pupil, but none to the extent where the pupil was excluded from discussions in the classroom. This is often experienced by teachers in the modern classroom and they must learn to cope with these challenges. There has been major debate of mainstreaming pupils with various disabilities in the modern Irish classroom. “ Traditionally, if children have particular difficulties in a school they have been put together with other children whose needs are similar. It is argued that this allows special facilities and specially trained staff to be made available to children who need them..... Putting together groups of children who are thought to have similar needs results in them being segregated from other pupils of their age. This can be stigmatizing; it can also restrict access to important educational opportunities" (Frederickson p63.). However, in the 21st century classroom, the teacher is going to face pupils with special educational needs at some point or another. According to our lecture notes the term “ special educational needs" means that a pupil may have a restriction in the capacity to participate and benefit from education due to a physical, mental health, sensory or learning disability or any other condition that results in that person learning differently (Week 7, Lecture 13). During my A. E. E. placement there was only one pupil who had special educational needs. This pupil had a mild learning disability similar to that of dyscalculia. In the centre, basic mathematical concepts such as addition, subtraction and multiplication were taught and practiced through games such as darts.

Although most of the pupils struggled at times with basic problems, this particular pupil found it more difficult than the others. According to his teacher, due to learning disability the pupil would often become frustrated and simply give up. It is very important for teachers to be able to recognize any symptoms that pupils may have of a specific learning disability. Many learning disabilities can go unrecognized and as a result that particular pupil may not benefit as much from the teaching methods employed by the teacher as other pupils would. This brings us to discuss the idea of integration and inclusion of pupils with disabilities into our classrooms and schools as a whole. It is important to remember that “ integration is about making a limited number of additional arrangements for individual pupils with SEN in schools which themselves change little overall. On the other hand, inclusion implies the introduction of a more radical set of changes through which schools restructure themselves so as to be able to embrace all children” (Frederickson p. 65). The main challenge that teachers face is that they cannot plan a whole lesson around a specific learning disability. This is why there is a need for special needs assistants (S. N. A.’s) and resource teachers. However teachers often feel “ without such support the difficulties for teachers and some pupils can seem insurmountable. Teachers often feel ill-equipped to respond to this range of emotional and behaviour difficulties of “ disturbed” children..... ” (Hanko, 1990, p3). So unless there is additional support or continuous professional development for the modern teacher, teachers will continue to struggle to cope in teaching pupils who may suffer from learning disabilities. So to conclude the 21st teacher in the Irish education is presented with many difficult and sensitive challenges by

diversity. These challenges have to be dealt with appropriately in the classroom. As a result of diversity in the modern classroom teachers need to “ know how to examine their own cultural assumptions to understand how these shape their starting points for practice, while also knowing how to uncover students’ strengths, interests, and ways of communicating and behaving. To instruct students who learn in different ways, teachers need a repertoire of teaching strategies that respond to different learning styles and approaches. They need to diagnose how students learn as well as what they know by using a wide range of formal and informal assessment tools that are appropriate for students of different cultural and language backgrounds. They should know as well about curriculum content and materials that are inclusive of the contributions and perspectives of different groups" (National Academy of Education, 2005, p22). Thanks to the Alternative Education Experience placement I now have a much deeper understanding and knowledge of the various challenges that diversity can present in an learning environment thus allowing me to be more prepared to appropriately deal with these challenges. “ To teach all children well, teachers must know how to tailor their curriculum and instruction so that their students will be engaged in meaningful work. A basic principle of learning is that people need to begin with what they already know and have experienced and connect it to new information or ideas they are trying to learn" (National Academy of Education, 2005, p21). Bibliography: * Drudy, S. and Lynch, K. (1993). Schools and Society in Ireland. Dublin 8: Gill and MacMillan Ltd. p142. * Drudy, S. and Lynch, K. (1993). Schools and Society in Ireland. Dublin 8: Gill and MacMillan Ltd. p145. * Hanko, G. (1990). Special Needs in ordinary

classrooms. 2nd ed. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd. p1. * Hanks, G. (1990).
Special Needs in ordinary classrooms. 2nd ed. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd.
p3. * Corson, D. (1998). Changing Education for Diversity. Celtic Court 22
Ballmoor: Open University Press. p8. * National Academy of Education
(2005). A good teacher in every classroom . San Francisco, CA.: A Wiley
Imprint. P21-22. * Best, R. (2000). Education for Spiritual, Moral, Social and
Cultural Development. London: Wellington House. p156-157. * Frederickson,
N. et al. (2002). Special Educational Needs, Inclusion and Diversity.
Berkshire: Open University Press. p63. * Frederickson, N. et al. (2002).
Special Educational Needs, Inclusion and Diversity. Berkshire: Open
University Press. p65. * Darmody, M. et al. (2011). The Changing Faces of
Ireland. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers. p125. * Masterson, M. (2011).
Diversity: Definitional Issues, EN4016: Diversity in Education, 27th Jan,
University of Limerick, unpublished. * Masterson, M. (2011). Educational
Disadvantage and Diversity, EN4016: Diversity in Education, 10th Feb,
University of Limerick, unpublished. * Batteson, T. (2011). SEN, EN4016:
Diversity in Education, 5th Mar, University of Limerick, unpublished *
University of Oregon. (1999). Definition of Diversity (online), available:
<http://gladstone.uoregon.edu/~asuomca/diversityinit/definition.html>