

Teaching Multiculturalism in Three Schools in the Derry City Council Area

Mary Delargy

This article is based on a six-month research project funded by the Community Relations Council looking at the teaching of multiculturalism in three primary schools in Derry. The primary aim of the research was to look at the different issues faced by teachers and pupils in the teaching of multiculturalism. The project aimed also to examine whether this teaching differed in different types of school – the three schools visited for the research were one each from the Controlled, Catholic and Integrated sector.

Numbers of pupils attending schools in Northern Ireland change rapidly with the arrival of migrants almost on a daily basis, so any figures given are not completely accurate. However, a recent Parliamentary question by Dr Alasdair McDonnell gives some indication of the number of pupils studying English as an Additional Language (EAL) in each of the five Education and Library Board areas.

Dr. Alasdair McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many children whose country of origin is outside Northern Ireland and whose first language is other than English are enrolled in (a) primary and (b) secondary schools in each education and library board area, broken down by country of origin. [86563]

Maria Eagle: Information relating to children whose country of origin is outside Northern Ireland is not collected. The figures available relate to the first language of children who were born in a non-English speaking country and for whom English is not their first language.¹

**Pupils with English as an additional language and born in a
non-English speaking country at primary and post primary schools
in Northern Ireland 2005-06**

	<i>Belfast</i>	<i>Western</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>South</i>	<i>Southern</i>	<i>NI Total</i>
Primary Schools						
Cantonese	32	8	36	51	11	138
Mandarin	—(1)	—(1)	6	—(1)	—(1)	12
Vietnamese	—(1)	—(1)	—(1)	(1)—	—(1)	—(1)
Hindi	—(1)	—(1)	—(1)	(1)—	—(1)	13
Urdu	—(1)	—(1)	—(1)	9	16	30
Gujarati	—(1)	—(1)	—(1)	(1)—	—(1)	—(1)
Bengali	9	—(1)	—(1)	14	—(1)	26
Punjabi	—(1)	—(1)	11	—(1)	5	25
Others	30	8	25	46	17	126
Total	77	29	85	130	54	375
Post Primary Schools						
Cantonese	22	—(1)	16	(2)—	13	66
Mandarin	—(1)	—(1)	—(1)	—(1)	—(1)	6
Hindi	5	—(1)	5	—(1)	—(1)	10
Urdu	—(1)	—(1)	—(1)	—(1)	—(1)	8
Bengali	8	—(1)	—(1)	—(1)	—(1)	12
Punjabi	—(1)	—(1)	—(1)	—(1)	—(1)	5
Others	29	18	15	15	43	120
Total	67	20	46	31	63	227

(1) Relates to less than 5 pupils

(2) Means figure has not been given under rules of disclosure

Notes:

1. Figures for primary schools include children in nursery, reception and Year 1—Year 7 classes.
2. Pupils whose first language is Irish are not included.

Source: NI school census

We might expect that the highest numbers of non-English speakers would be from the A8 countries from Eastern Europe, among recently arrived migrants. A significant number of the EAL pupils are, however, from the Chinese community, especially Cantonese speakers where the parents often do not speak English fluently. The statistics paint an incomplete picture of the multicultural composition of Northern Ireland's classrooms. They do not, for example, include those children from the minority ethnic communities who were born in the province and who have grown up with English as their mother tongue.

Choosing the schools

The decision to choose the three schools studied was made for a number of reasons.

Firstly, they represent the three largest groupings within the primary school education sector in Northern Ireland. The primary sector was also chosen for a number of reasons. Firstly it allowed for the teachers to be observed working across the whole curriculum and to see how various facets of the teaching of multiculturalism could be incorporated into the different lessons. Because of their nature primary schools are more likely to have a whole-school policy on the teaching of multiculturalism, whereas secondary schools are more likely to be influenced by the subject being taught with more emphasis likely in subjects such as Religious Education, English and History.

Additionally in primary schools, children spend the whole day with a particular group of their peers rather than being with different groups for different subjects allowing a greater overview of interaction within the group.

Before choosing the schools for the focus group, the researcher spoke to the member of staff with the Derry area of the Western Education and Library Board who has responsibility for EAL teaching. This was beneficial in a number of ways. Not only was the author able to find out which schools had pupils from a multiethnic background attending them, but staff were also able to provide information about schools which had programmes aimed at minority ethnic pupils in place.

Initial meetings were held with the principals of the three schools to find out about their policy on multiculturalism. Headteachers made suggestions about how they felt the project could best be managed within the school

setting. The decision about which classes would take part was left up to the individual school. Because of the age of the children there were various difficulties which had to be considered. Normally in research it would be possible to design and develop a questionnaire for use by participants. Since the age range was from five to eleven years, this was obviously not ethical. The author felt that interviewing was probably not the most effective research method given both the young age of the children and the fact that there was the possibility of the interview being perceived as being 'loaded' since topics such as racism and multiculturalism are not regular subjects for conversation among this age group. The most practical way of obtaining the information appeared to be through classroom observation. This allowed the researcher to see the various methodologies used by the teacher within the classroom setting in addition to observing the reactions of both the children from a minority ethnic background and those from the traditional British/ Irish background to specific situations. In the event, the researcher's participation in various classroom activities allowed certain questions to be asked of the children in an informal setting and information was volunteered about some issues without specific questions having to be asked. Although the author was not able to conduct in-depth interviews with the children, there were opportunities for asking some questions in the various groups.

One of the schools also holds a regular coffee morning for parents of minority ethnic children which the researcher was invited to attend. This provided an additional opportunity to find out views about the issue of multiculturalism in the schools.

It would have been advantageous in some ways to meet with the class teachers before beginning the period of observation so that there would be some feedback from them as to their own ideas about teaching in a multicultural setting and to see how closely these were tied to the school policy. Not having met with them did, however, have one advantage. Throughout the author's research most teachers, both in the schools observed and those with whom there had initially been contact, took the focus of the work to be on EAL rather than multiculturalism. The advantage here was that the lessons observed were spontaneous, teachers did not feel under any pressure to emphasise what they felt was being sought in the research.

The Classroom Visits

Over the period of the research, a number of visits were paid to the schools involved in the project. On each occasion the author was assigned to a particular class to work with them for a full day. In school A it was the same class for all visits, a P4 or age 7-8 year group. Within the class were children from a number of different nationalities. Some had been living in Northern Ireland for a considerable period of time while others were recently arrived in the school and were still finding their feet

In school B the visits were to two different classes, one P1 age 4-5 and the other P3 age 6-7.

Throughout the school day, there were various examples of ways in which different traditions and cultural practices were woven into the curriculum.

English as an Additional Language

English as an Additional Language (EAL) has been the focus of much attention in schools in Northern Ireland over the past five years. There are two main reasons for it. Firstly, children are arriving in Northern Ireland almost on a weekly basis who do not have English as their first language, nor in most cases are their parents able to converse fluently in English. Until recently, this phenomenon would have been found only in certain areas of Northern Ireland, for example close to hospitals or to the two universities where there would have been a tradition of workers coming from other countries. Currently the problem is found throughout Northern Ireland and staff in the Education and Library Boards are inundated with requests from both urban and rural schools where there may only be one pupil or several from the same family arriving at once.

Pupils are defined as having EAL if²: they were born in a non- English-speaking country, have significant difficulties with English and have lived in Northern Ireland for less than two years; they were born in a non-English speaking country and have lived in Northern Ireland for more than two years but continue to have significant difficulties with English ; they were born in an English-speaking country but have significant difficulties with English because their parents do not speak English. Currently an allowance of £912 per pupil per annum is made for language support.

English as an additional language is a major area of concern for teachers in a multicultural school environment. There was a significant difference in the level of English among the children. A number of factors contributed to this. While the length of time in Northern Ireland was obviously a significant factor, there was also the issue of whether or not the family had been learning English prior to their arrival. Fluency of the parents also contributed to the children's language skills, as did the home language. The difference was obvious not only through the range of vocabulary used but also in the child's confidence in using English.

Good Practice and EAL

Several examples of good practice were evident from the schools visited. One school had a wide variety of tools through which children's language skills could be improved. One of these was the 'objects box'. These boxes contained items relating to different themes such as food and transport. One EAL child worked with two or three of the other children playing with the objects in the box. The intention was that children whose first language was English would tell the others what the various objects in the box were called, repeating the words as necessary. This project was particularly popular as over a period of time all the children had an opportunity to take part in the activities and show off their skills. Children were withdrawn from class mainly for reading; they took their lessons along with others of their peers who would not have been such fluent readers. Consequently, children did not feel that they were excluded from activities in which fellow-pupils were involved. Both schools were reluctant to use withdrawal for one to one learning as a method of improving pupil's language skills as they considered the self-consciousness felt by pupils at having to be taught separately outweighed any advances in linguistic skills. It is interesting to note that while EAL children did not seem to have difficulties in working alongside children with reading difficulties, research in Scotland³ shows that parents of EAL children have issues with this as they consider that their children are being regarded as being poor learners rather than merely being disadvantaged by their lack of fluency in the English language.

Creative Writing/Story time

In both schools visited, the researcher had an opportunity to observe creative writing lessons and story time. One of the lessons observed was taken by an external facilitator who had been working with the pupils over the period of several weeks.

The topic for the lesson observed concerned winning a prize of a trip to anywhere in the world. The local children's choices ranged from places with which they were already familiar to the exotic including several trips to the World Cup. All of the children who had joined the school from other countries expressed a desire to return to their own country. This gave rise to a short discussion about why they might want to go back there. Because of the age of the children it centred on aspects such as missing one's extended family, school friends, being able to say whatever you liked without having to find the word in another language etc., rather than more abstract concepts such as differences in culture and lifestyle. It did, however, provide the local children with an insight into the lives of those who had come from other countries and the difficulties which they faced in adapting to life in Northern Ireland. In school C there was a very conscious attempt to ensure that children whose first language was not English had an opportunity to express themselves during class discussions and also that where appropriate they could explain some aspects which differed in the lifestyle in their native country.

Both of the schools visited had a wide range of multicultural reading material in the school libraries. There are two main forms of material available for schools. One is a selection of stories available as dual language texts in a range of languages. They include traditional tales such as *Cinderella*, *Little Red Riding Hood* and the *Fox and the Crow*. These texts allow younger children to share the stories with the fellow-pupils while reading the more difficult words in their native language. These stories are familiar to children from a European background, but probably less so to children from other countries as their parents would be unlikely to have grown up with them. Some other books available deal with similar themes in different traditions, for example the practices which surround the birth and naming of a new baby. These have proven valuable in giving local children insights into customs in different countries.

Religious Education

Recent recommendations on the teaching of the core syllabus on religious education in grant-aided schools in Northern Ireland includes recommendations on the teaching of religions other than Christianity.⁴ A variety of proposals have been put forward, including those relating to the age-group at which children should be taught about world religions, with suggestions for Key Stage 2 (8-11 years) from a number of groups representing non-Christian religions and Key Stage 3 (age 12-14) being proposed by the leaders of the four main churches.

The two schools visited had differing approaches to religious education. This was unsurprising given that one school is supporting a broad Christian ethos using a programme devised by the four main churches and the other promotes the Catholic faith. Although school A is Christian in ethos, it welcomes those of other faiths or none. Children at the school are aware of other faiths and know something about other religious festivals, for example where pupils' families are taking part in Ramadan, or about religions which have specific dietary requirements.

As the other school was specifically Catholic in ethos, all children belonged to the same faith group. There was some discussion about the difference between the religious observance of the Polish children and the locals- the Polish children were praised for their regularity in attending the sacraments and the fervency of their singing. As the children who attend this school are living in a mixed Catholic/ Protestant area they have some understanding of the differences between the two major religious traditions in Northern Ireland but their knowledge of religions other than Christianity is extremely limited.

The researcher was unable to arrange a visit to the third school participating in the project. However, the school did provide a list of multicultural activities which had taken place throughout the year. These included having school assemblies which highlighted the main features of religions other than Christianity and allowing pupils to make cards to celebrate their religious festivals in the same way that other children in the school make cards for Christmas and Easter.

In addition, they outlined how any discussion on religion in the school must start from the point that not all those taking part are members of a Christian church and members of a minority religious community are encouraged to share their beliefs.

Home-School Liaison

Home-school liaison was felt by all three schools to be a particularly important part of the work in integrating children from a minority ethnic background into the school. Particular strategies have been put in place where the parent's first language is not English. Schools will only use an interpreter if there are major difficulties or particularly complex issues to be dealt with. In any case, for some of the lesser- used languages it would be almost impossible to find someone sufficiently fluent in both languages to take on the task. All of the teachers spoken to felt that written communication had some advantages insofar as the parent could look up words they did not understand and would not feel under pressure to give an immediate response.

On the other hand, there were a lot of advantages in human contact, especially as emotions could be read and, where information was not of a sensitive nature such as times for after-schools clubs or parents' meetings, other parents could help interpret.

This home- school contact was felt to be particularly useful for finding out about religious observances. One school cited the example of a pupil who began to decline school milk. Even when pressed by the teacher she continued to refuse but gave no explanation. Eventually discussion with the child's mother revealed that during a period of fasting she did not only have to abstain from meat, as the teacher was aware, but also from all dairy produce.

All schools taking part in the project would have encouraged parents of pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds to come into the school to talk about their native country. This took a number of different forms where parents discussed their religious observances with older pupils in the school or gave a talk on the history and geography of their country. Even more popular with the children were the food- tasting sessions where parents brought in dishes from their native country and all the children in the class had an opportunity to sample them.

Attitudes and issues of multiculturalism: the teachers' experiences

In compiling this report the author drew on experiences not only from the schools involved in the project but also from comments from other schools-based events which had been attended during the research period. Some of the comments also came from principals and teachers in schools which had initially been approached to take part in the research but which, for a variety of reasons, had declined to do so. There was a significant variation in attitude between schools where there were already children from minority ethnic communities attending and those where the children were from traditional Protestant/Catholic backgrounds. For example, when asked about teaching multiculturalism, schools with pupils from other cultures spoke of the positive experiences of diversity and the benefits for children of learning about different cultures at close hand. In schools with a 'traditional' intake, the question was almost always answered in a completely different way—multiculturalism was 'out there', not something children in the city would be likely to encounter in their everyday lives. Teachers spoke of missionaries coming to the schools to talk to the children about Africa and India and the experiences of schoolchildren there. This concept of multiculturalism was not confined to members of one religion but came from both Protestant and Catholic schools.

Attitudes towards multiculturalism in the north-west are generally very positive, with the majority of those interviewed feeling that a multicultural community has many benefits. These include giving children an opportunity to experience different cultures at first hand, learning about languages, religious beliefs and other cultural practices from their peers in a way which children could not always have learned from their teachers and also the breaking of the traditional Protestant/Catholic two-traditions model and encouraging the children to see themselves in the context of a wider, more diverse community.

Not all attitudes were quite so positive. There was, as might have been expected, a certain lack of self-confidence especially among the older teachers who had been used to dealing with children from broadly similar cultural backgrounds and with comparable standards of spoken English. Suddenly being faced with pupils who did not speak the same language and whose religious and cultural practices were more or less unknown was a definite challenge. While most of them rose admirably to this challenge, there were some who adopted a 'Why me?' attitude as they described the difficulties of

teaching children whose first language was not English and who were struggling to adapt to Northern Irish culture. One teacher also described somewhat flippantly how the greatest benefit of having children from diverse cultural backgrounds was that for a school struggling financially the EAL grants were a very useful source of income. His remarks were met with disbelief by many of the audience who at first assumed them to be some kind of joke until further questioning showed he was perfectly serious in his attitude. In one of the schools visited but not participating directly in the research, the head was describing a visitor to the school – who was said to be ‘As black as the Ace of Spades’. The author was completely taken aback at this remark with its obviously racist overtones and asked for it to be repeated. The principal was completely oblivious as to why this was being requested – and repeated it verbatim.

Issues and attitudes in pupils

Given the age of the pupils, children were not asked directly about their attitudes to persons from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds to their own. The author relied instead on remarks made by the children in relation to specific incidents or events and also on information from parents of children at the participating schools and those with which the author was involved in other projects.

As with the teachers, attitudes among pupils were generally positive. In primary schools children were much more tolerant and accepting of pupils from other backgrounds. Overall they saw little difference between themselves and other children, except occasionally to remark that it was harder to play with children whose first language was not English because they sometimes were not able to understand how the rules of a game worked. In contrast to Connolly’s findings about sectarian awareness in young children, children seemed to take little cognisance of other pupils’ religious practices but were fascinated and somewhat envious when the pupils arrived at school in their national costumes. Parents of pupils’ from ethnic minority backgrounds were asked by the researcher about their children’s experiences. Since a direct question about racism was likely to provoke a negative response regardless of their experiences, the question was asked in terms of how the child was getting on at school. Generally the response was positive and any unfavourable attitudes were felt to be as a result of the child not being able to participate because of their lack of English rather than for any more sinister reasons.

Only in one school in which the research was carried out was there an example of racism. Moreover the story came to the author not directly from the pupils or families involved but through a more indirect telling. One child of Indian origin had been playing easily with other pupils in her class until the mother of one of the pupils found out. The pupil was forbidden to play with the Indian child any more with her mother saying that 'That child's dirty-look at the colour of her!' As the child repeated these remarks to other children in the class the Indian child became more and more isolated. To compound the problem she said nothing about it either in school or at home for several days, feeling that the fault must be hers, so the teacher was unable to intervene to remedy the situation. Much more common in primary schools was the less direct form of racism and this was something which the author encountered both in the schools visited for research and in other schools in the Derry City Council area. These included talking in 'Chinese' where pupils poked fun at the way they perceived Chinese people to speak and calling one another a 'gipsy'. The author asked what was meant by the remark and was told that it meant they were dirty or untidy or their clothes did not conform to what was considered fashionable. There was a marked contrast in secondary schools. Teenagers tended to be much more conscious of difference and much less tolerant of those who they felt to be outsiders. They were more likely also to belong to cliques. There were no incidents of racial harassment against those who spoke to the author, rather pupils mentioned feeling isolated as they were seldom asked to participate in events because they were perceived not to belong.

Conclusions and Recommendations.

Among the schools researched for this report, there seemed to be a high level of commitment to the idea of multiculturalism in the classroom setting. Teachers showed enthusiasm for weaving the idea of diversity and difference into various aspects of the curriculum, going beyond addressing only the difficulties of teaching children who did not have English as their first language- and even here one teacher went further than most by learning a few words of Polish to speak to the children. Teachers also succeeded in promoting the diversity of the different groups in such a way that the children felt they were 'special' and worthy of the attention they were receiving rather than feeling they were different and did not belong.

Teachers in schools where there were pupils from a wide range of backgrounds and where the children had been attending over a number of years were confident in dealing with issues such as cultural differences and children speaking English as an additional language. Teachers who had not yet had the experience of teaching a multicultural class or those coming to it for the first time, to whom the author spoke, professed themselves very nervous at the prospect. The issue needs to be addressed in a number of ways.

Firstly, more research needs to be undertaken on best practice in this area and ways found to include some experiences of teaching multicultural classes for trainee teachers.

In-service days for teachers already in the classroom provide useful examples of overcoming problems and addressing sensitive issues. These could be organised on a smaller scale perhaps once a term and in a more informal way so that issues can be addressed as they arise. One issue which was mentioned at the day organised by WELB was that of a single child from a minority ethnic group arriving in a school, particularly in a rural area and not having the support of others in a similar situation. Inservice training may also include some work on exploring personal attitudes towards a multicultural society, for example on the use of inclusive language.

As mentioned above, two schools in Derry have already pooled their resources for organising English classes and similar schemes may be possible in rural areas where schools could be twinned for activities in much the same way as many of them are already twinned for cross- community activities.

Even an informal network where teachers know, for example, that children from one nationality are attending another school in the locality allows staff to discuss issues of cultural diversity and perhaps plan shared activities. Networks to support parents such as those providing help in improving reading skills could also be introduced. There are also many benefits of the public library service as a resource for those teaching multiculturalism in the primary school.

Home-school liaison has already been mentioned as a particularly important part of the provision of a programme of multiculturalism in schools. Parents should be encouraged to work with schools in ensuring that the needs of their child in terms of religious observances, dietary requirements etc are met in a way most appropriate within the classroom setting.

Contacts with external organisations play a vital role in disseminating information about the different cultural traditions of the various minority ethnic groups in a community. Schools should be made aware of which communities have such groups in their area or where umbrella groups for minority ethnic groups exist, and also have information about training for teachers and/ or pupils provided by these organisations.

The use of visible signs of multiculturalism and multilingualism in schools should be encouraged through the use of multilingual signs and posters as these seem to be particularly effective in schools where they are already in use. They can be obtained easily and relatively cheaply from a number of organisations. Where there are children from many different nationalities at a school it may also be worth considering making a multilingual edition of the school handbook.

Notes

- 1 House of Commons, Hansard, 25th July 2006,
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmhansrd/cm060725/text60725w2068.htm>
- 2 http://www.deni.gov.uk/common_funding_scheme_part_3
- 3 <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2005/03/Insight16/1>
- 4 http://www.deni.gov.uk/final_proposals_document.pdf