

The intercultural dimension of post-primary education

Why focus on the intercultural dimension of education?

Intercultural competence is the capacity to recognise, respect and interpret cultural diversity and difference in all their forms. The development of intercultural competence is an explicit goal of post-primary education in Ireland. According to *Looking at our School 2016*, highly effective practice produces students who “demonstrate an enquiring and open-minded attitude towards themselves and those around them” (p. 13) and are “respectful of and interested in the opinions and experiences of their classmates” (p. 15; all emphasis in original). There is also a commitment in *Languages Connect: Ireland’s Foreign Languages in Education strategy* to the development of guidelines and good practice exemplars to help principals, teachers and parents to support the intercultural dimension and promote the home language when it is neither Irish nor English (Action 2.E.6).

Intercultural competence provides protection against cultural essentialism, which is the practice of categorizing the members of a particular community or society according to “essential” cultural qualities. Trivially, this leads to familiar stereotypes – all French families have a baguette and café au lait for breakfast; all Germans eat sauerkraut and wurst; every Swiss household contains a cuckoo clock. Non-trivially, however, it can lead to exclusion and racism: those deemed not to possess the qualities characteristic of a particular community or society may find themselves marginalized and in the worst case persecuted.

Education is an intercultural undertaking in two senses. Ireland’s schoolgoing population is linguistically and culturally diverse, so in most schools social integration and effective collaboration in the classroom depend on the development of students’ intercultural competence. At the same time, each school subject has its own dialect of academic language and thus its own culture: the terminology that defines key concepts, the distinctive ways in which enquiry is conducted, the registers and genres in which knowledge is communicated. Thus, with their teachers’ support students develop intercultural competence as they navigate the curriculum. This can be given a cross-linguistic dimension through the use of CLIL methodologies. All teachers should play an active role in promoting linguistic integration, furthering their students’ proficiency in the language of schooling, and helping them to access the language of their particular curriculum subject.

Defining culture

It is important to recognize that the term *culture* has two distinct though related senses. On the one hand it denotes artistic and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement – literature, music, painting, sculpture, styles of architecture, systems of governance, legal codes, etc.; on the other hand, it refers to the customs, ideas, beliefs and social behaviour of groups of people. A sense of belonging to the group can affect a students’ self-esteem and also their identity and wellbeing. Schools should help students to bridge the two or more cultures they experience in their day-to-day lives – the culture/s lived at home and the culture experienced in school. This is an aim of this project: target-setting and implementation of actions under school self-evaluation and school planning.

We all belong to multiple cultures in the second of these senses. Some of those cultures are very large – nations, for example, which are often described with reference to cultural achievements in our first sense but also in terms of customs, dominant beliefs and distinctive social behaviours. Other cultures are much smaller, though they too can be described with reference to distinctive customs, beliefs and behaviour. Professions, political parties, religious denominations, sports clubs and associations of all kinds fall into this category. Within communities it is usual for different age groups to belong to generational cultures: parents typically have little knowledge or experience of the culture of which their teenage children are active members.

An Intercultural Look at our Schools is an adaptation of the project “A roadmap for schools to support the language(s) of schooling” (2017-2019) of the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML). The ECML is a Council of Europe institution promoting excellence in language education in its member states. www.ecml.at/roadmapforschools

Multilingual and plurilingual, multicultural and pluricultural: some terminological clarifications

Multilingual refers to communities in which two or more languages are used; plurilingual refers to a person's ability to communicate in two or more languages or *in two or more varieties of the same language*. The post-primary curriculum aims to develop students who are plurilingual in both senses: they learn Irish and, in most cases, a foreign language, and they engage with different varieties of academic language in the different school subjects.

Multicultural refers to communities in which two or more cultures are present. In this case culture tends to denote an ethnic group, so multiculturalism often entails multilingualism. Pluricultural refers to people who belong to two or more cultures and thus identify with two or more sets of values, beliefs and practices. Although we are all *pluricultural* in this sense, it is important to note that learning a foreign language does not automatically lead to membership of the cultures and sub-cultures to which speakers of that language belong.

Over the past quarter century immigration has brought some 200 new languages to Ireland, and many of the speakers of those languages have grown up in cultures very different from our own. It is important to recognize the infinitely variable extent to which they either retain the values, attitudes and beliefs of their culture of origin or adopt values, attitudes and beliefs they take to be typical of their new environment. The same is true of children, whether or not they were born in Ireland. They may spend school holidays in their parents' country of origin and thus develop pluriculturality that is rooted in plurilingualism. Alternatively, they may have no contact with the country and culture from which their parents came, apart from the stories and reminiscences their parents share with them. This diversity requires that immigrant students' cultural affiliation and knowledge are treated with sensitivity and tact.

The image of the student in *Looking at our School 2016*

Looking at our School 2016 "views students as *active agents in their learning* who engage purposefully in a wide range of learning activities and who respond in a variety of ways to different learning opportunities" (p. 7; emphasis added). Agents make choices, carry out actions on the basis of their choices, and evaluate the outcomes and consequences of their actions. In educational contexts learners who are active agents are said to be **autonomous**. They accept responsibility for their learning, identify goals, plan and monitor their learning, and continuously assess their progress. As *Looking at our School* puts it: "at the level of highly effective practice students 'have the skills to modify and adapt their behaviour when required, and recognise the need to do so themselves'" (p. 8); they have "a sense of ownership of their work, take pride in it, and take responsibility for improving it" (p. 16); they "reflect on their behaviour and attitude to learning, and are able to set meaningful personal goals as a result of their reflection" (ibid.); and "where the school curriculum provides opportunities to do so, students negotiate their learning thereby increasing their autonomy and effectiveness as learners" (ibid.; all emphasis in original). In principle it is possible to be an autonomous learner regardless of the pedagogical approach adopted by the teacher; in practice, however, most students will achieve autonomy only if their teachers frame learning in a recursive cycle of planning, implementation and reflective evaluation in which the learners are full partners.

Students' capacity for autonomous learning can be developed together with their plurilingualism and their intercultural competence. In most school subjects they can contribute to project work by using their proficiency in curriculum and home languages to conduct internet searches that bring multiple perspectives to bear on the topic they are working on.

Presenting the Toolkit to the School Community: Some Suggestions

This project is also relevant in the context of the sustainable development goals, in particular Goal 3 (good health and wellbeing), Goal 4 (quality education) and goal 10 (reduced inequalities) among others. An important principle of Transforming our World: Agenda 2030, linked to the universal inclusiveness of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), is the commitment to Leave No One Behind. The UN recognises that people who are most at risk of being left behind are those who experience inequality because of their ability, age, ancestry, class, culture, ethnicity, geographical location, gender, or health status, language, race, religion, and/or sexual orientation. Where a culture/language has dominance, or when there is a lack of recognition of culture/language, this can lead to an undermining of human rights and inequalities. The ethical imperative to reach the most marginalised and disadvantaged in local, national, and international communities recognises the importance of people-centric development and the key role and importance of inclusion and equality.

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