

One Irish primary school's response to the challenge of diversity

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Overview

- Managing diversity: two educational goals
- Autonomy, language and pedagogy
- Primary schooling in Ireland
- Scoil Bhríde Cailíní, Blanchardstown
- Some concluding reflections

Managing diversity:
two educational goals

Goal 1: The language of schooling

- Ensure that children and adolescents from immigrant homes gain full access to education
- Develop their proficiency in the language of schooling
- Three approaches (OECD 2006)
 - Teach immigrant pupils/students separately until they are capable of participating in the mainstream
 - Assign them to mainstream classes but withdraw them for regular intensive instruction in the language of schooling
 - Provide them with language support in the mainstream classroom
- The Irish government funds two years of English language support for each immigrant pupil/student; usually provided on a withdrawal basis

Goal 2: Exploiting diversity

- A much less central policy concern
- *Together Towards Inclusion* (IILT & SELB 2007)
 - Toolkit to help schools to develop inclusiveness
 - Joint North–South initiative
 - Input from primary principals North and South
 - Publication co-funded by DES and DENI
 - Copies distributed to all primary schools on the island
- If we are serious about inclusiveness, we must develop an integrated approach to language education
 - Language of schooling
 - Languages of the curriculum
 - Immigrants' home languages

Autonomy, language and pedagogy

Autonomy as a basic need (Deci 1996)

“To parents, even babies seem to have a will of their own; they are hardly passive creatures to be easily moulded by the actions of others. From their earliest years, boys and girls make their active presence, their wilful agency, their demands and protests, very vividly felt. In every household that has children, negotiations must be made with young family members; their personal agendas have somehow to be accommodated. These are not the helpless, dependent beings that supposedly define childhood” (Salmon 1998: 24)

Language and autonomy

- The language we first learn in childhood is
 - the medium of our
 - primary socialisation: fundamental to our emerging subjectivity and sense of self
 - discursive thinking: verbal reflection of all kinds
 - agency: the tool with which, alone or in interaction with others, we navigate the challenges of everyday life
 - the ground of our self-awareness (identity)
 - the medium in which we shape our knowledge of the world and pursue our interests (“action knowledge”; Barnes 1976)
 - the soil in which our autonomy grows and the medium through which we exercise it

Autonomy and language teaching/learning

- The plurilingual ideal: to develop a linguistic repertoire “to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact” (Council of Europe 2001: 4)
- The educational goal: to extend the learner’s autonomy via proficiency in a new language, which means making that language a part of the learner’s subjectivity
- Three pedagogical principles (Little 2007)
 - Learner involvement (exploit learners’ interests/identities, engage their “action knowledge”) – the role of interactive talk
 - Reflection (planning, monitoring, evaluating: self-management)
 - Spontaneous and authentic target language use (key role played by interaction; writing in order to speak, speaking in order to write)

Primary schooling in Ireland

The primary curriculum

- General aims
 - “to enable the child to live a full life as a child and to realize his or her potential as a unique individual” (Government of Ireland 1999: 7)
 - “to enable the child to develop as a social being through living and co-operating with others and so contribute to the good of society” (ibid.)
 - “to prepare the child for further education and lifelong learning” (ibid.)
- Some fundamental principles
 - “the child is an active agent in his or her learning (ibid.: 8)
 - “the child’s existing knowledge and experience form the basis for learning” (ibid.)
 - “collaborative learning should feature in the learning process” (ibid.: 9)
 - “parents are the child’s primary educators, and the life of the home is the most potent factor in his or her development during the primary school years” (ibid.: 24)

Seven areas of curriculum content

- Language – Irish and English
- Mathematics
- Social, environmental and scientific education (history, geography, science)
- Arts education (visual arts, music, drama)
- Physical education
- Social, personal and health education
- Religious or ethical education
 - The responsibility of the different school patron bodies, predominantly the Roman Catholic Church and the (Anglican) Church of Ireland

Curriculum divided into four bands

- Junior and Senior Infants
 - Optional; equivalent to pre-school in other countries
- First and Second Class
- Third and Fourth Class
- Fifth and Sixth Class

Scoil Bhríde Cailíní,
Blanchardstown

Scoil Bhríde Cailíní, Blanchardstown

- Girls' primary school in a western suburb of Dublin
- In 2014–2015 the school has 322 pupils, almost 80% of whom have a home language other than English or Irish
- Most of the 80% had little or no English when they started school
- Currently 49 home languages in addition to English and Irish:
Afrikaans, Amharic, Arabic, Bangla, Benin, Bosnian, Cantonese, Dari, Cebuano, Estonian, Foola, French, German, Hebrew, Hindi, Hungarian, Igbo, Ilonggo, Indonesian, Ishekiri, Italian, Kannada, Kinyarwanda, Konkani, Kurdish, Latvian, Lingala, Lithuanian, Malay, Malayalam, Mandarin, Marathi, Moldovan, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Shona, Slovakian, Spanish, Swahili, Tagalog, Tamil, Ukrainian, Urdu, Vietnamese, Visaya, Xhosa, Yoruba

School policy: four principles

- Inclusive ethos
 - The school welcomes the diversity of its pupil population and acknowledges that each pupil has much to contribute to her own education (identity, “action knowledge”)
- Open language policy
 - No restrictions placed on pupils’ use of their home languages at school, whether inside or outside the classroom (agency, “action knowledge”)
- Strong emphasis on development of language awareness
 - Home languages treated as a resource for all learners
- Strong emphasis on development of literacy skills in English, Irish, French and home languages
 - Writing and speaking support one another in many different ways
 - Importance of parental involvement in their daughters’ literacy development

School policy: development and implementation

- All teachers take part in regular staff meetings at which issues of importance to the school are discussed
 - Language and literacy are regularly on the agenda
- Groups of teachers meet with the principal to review and update policy and its implementation
 - More experienced teachers mentor less experienced teachers
- Some teachers are enthusiastic about the school's language policy and actively seek new ways of developing and exploiting pupils' plurilingualism
- Others are less enthusiastic but always co-operative, especially if they are provided with support

How the timetable works

- Schools are expected to create specific timetable slots for English and Irish
 - English: 4 hours per week in Junior and Senior Infants; 5 hours per week thereafter
 - Irish: 2.5 hours per week in Junior and Senior Infants; 3.5 hours per week thereafter
- In Fifth and Sixth Class Scoil Bhríde also includes a timetable slot for French
 - Approximately one hour per week
- The Primary School Curriculum expects schools to create links between the various subjects taught
 - Scoil Bhríde does this by integrating English, Irish, home languages and French in the delivery of curriculum content

Junior Infants

- Teachers cultivate a secure, nurturing classroom environment
- Pupils encouraged to
 - express themselves using whatever language comes naturally to them
 - share words and phrases in their own language(s) relevant to topics under discussion, e.g. different colours, types of food, items of clothing, weather
 - use English, Irish and/or their home language when carrying out tasks that support the learning of basic mathematical concepts
- In the course of the year the teacher gradually includes all languages present in the class in classroom displays
- Learning to count is a multilingual activity

Senior Infants

- Days of the week gradually taught in English, Irish and all other languages present in the class
- Other classroom displays include individual pupils and their home language
- Pupils play classroom games in pairs: one pupil calls out an action – foot to foot, elbow to elbow, etc. – in English or Irish, her partner calls out the action in her home language, and both pupils perform the action
- Teachers provide worksheets that can be completed using English, Irish and home languages

First Class

- Texts in two languages: English and Irish; English/Irish and home language
- At the end of a lesson the teacher often asks individual children, or children with a shared home language, to translate key words and phrases into that language
- Emergence of language awareness
 - Six-year-old pupil from a Chinese family was able to recognise and translate a number of words in a children's publication, but translated *gate* as *door*
 - Explained that in her language, *door* is used to describe a means of entry both indoors and outdoors, while in English two different words are needed to take account of the different locations

Second Class

- A more elaborate approach to written composition in English
 - Choose a topic
 - Write a first draft
 - Revise the draft
 - Present it to the teacher for final correction
 - Read the draft aloud to the class
- Dual-language texts become more elaborate
- Autonomous decision of pupils to translate chorus of “It’s a small world after all” into 11 different languages

Third and Fourth Class

- Spontaneous translation between languages continues as opportunities present themselves
 - First five sentences of one child's story: *It was a frosty morning. Lucy woke up. The room was cold. She was late for school because there was a car crash. She thought it was because of the frost.*
 - Each sentence translated into a different home language: Irish, Spanish, Bangla, Hebrew, Hungarian
- Several pupils wrote about a hedgehog found in their teacher's garden
 - One pupil read aloud the text she had written in Tagalog
 - Another pupil, of Russian/Nigerian heritage, said she now knew the Tagalog word for *hedgehog*: *parkupino* reminded her of *porcupine*

Third and Fourth Class

- Dual-language writing becomes more elaborate
- Some children start to write in three languages
- One Filipino girl started keeping a diary about the exploits of her dog, Oliver, which she wrote entirely in Irish
- Children from English-speaking homes show an interest in writing in three languages
 - They may get help learning a third language from an older sibling who is learning a foreign language at secondary school or from a fellow pupil

Fifth and Sixth Class

- Pupils begin to learn French: another language in which to express curriculum content
- Self-assessment introduced: the languages tree and the self-assessment leaf
- Pupils draw on all the languages at their disposal to translate a Latin Christmas carol
- A German-speaking pupil on *sz* in Hungarian:
“... it’s the same in German, where you have *ch* but you say *sh* ... and do you remember when we were doing the homophones and we had the same words like I said with the three words *cherry*, *church* and *kitchen*, you have *Kirsche*, *Kirche* and *Küche*”

Fifth and Sixth Class

- Pupils improvise dramas to show how similarities between some languages allow speakers of those languages to understand one another
- Pupils use their plurilingual skills to write multilingual letters or diaries for fun or to respond to linguistic challenges like writing a story in English using as many French words as possible
- One English-speaking pupil interviewed classmates to find out why Irish is “backwards” (adjective follows noun); concluded that it’s actually English that is “backwards”

A multilingual fashion show (Sixth Class)

- Planned by the pupils
- Pupils acted as models and commentators, using every language available to them: English, Irish, French, home languages
- Each pupil invented a model and wrote about her in as many languages as possible
- *Marceline* is one example

Some concluding reflections

Scoil Bhríde's approach: four assumptions

1. Plurilingual pupils will learn most effectively if they are encouraged to use all the languages at their disposal whenever and however they want to
2. Even very young children can be trusted to know how to use their home language as a tool of learning (autonomy)
3. The development of oral proficiency, literacy and language awareness is a complex process in which reading and writing support listening and speaking and *vice versa*
4. Language awareness is a tool to support learning but also one of learning's most valuable outcomes

Scoil Bhríde's approach: key features

- Reflective and analytical dimensions firmly rooted in what pupils themselves contribute to their learning
- Because classroom interaction takes account of their existing knowledge, skills and interests, pupils tend to be fully engaged
- Pupils are agents of their own learning: as they progress through the school, their ability to direct and evaluate their learning becomes increasingly apparent
- The development of literacy in English as the principal language of schooling feeds into but also depends on the development of pupils' literacy in their home language, Irish and (in Fifth and Sixth Class) French

How do Scoil Bhríde's pupils compare with their peers?

- Starting in First Class, primary pupils are required to take standardised tests in English and maths in May each year
- In 2012–2013 and again in 2013–2014 Scoil Bhríde's pupils performed above the national average in both subjects

And yet ...

- Standardized test scores can't begin to do justice to the educational experience provided by the school
- We come closer to understanding that by listening to the teachers and their pupils

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