Developing children's awareness and knowledge of cultural diversity

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Practical background

This study took place in a large suburban primary school accommodating approximately 700 pupils. Over the past five years, there had been an increasing number of children from diverse ethnic backgrounds being enrolled. The subject of multiculturalism had not been addressed by the staff hitherto; consequently, there was no clear policy on how best to deal with difficulties that might arise in relation to the integration of these children in the school.

Research background

"At the heart of what makes a school multicultural lies managing diversity…..which includes changing mindsets as well as the underlying culture of a school" (Rosado, 1997, p.10). Korn and Bursztyn (2002) focus attention on two main issues, relating to teachers and to parents, which schools need to focus on when addressing multicultural education. Firstly, they maintain that "…many teachers, both black and white, fear that they will be isolated or rejected by fellow staff members if they speak openly about issues of race and class" (p.60). In addition, they stress that schools need to address ethnic minority parents' sense of powerlessness, caused by "lack of know-how in negotiating the school bureaucracy".

In 2005 the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) guidelines entitled "Intercultural Education in the Primary School" were distributed to every primary school teacher in the Republic of Ireland. However, two factors militated against their realisation. The Primary Curriculum Support Programme (PCSP) and the School Development Planning Support (SDPS) were providing a major initiative on curriculum reform at this time. Consequently, as Mc Gorman and Sugrue (2007) indicate "many practitioners did not attach adequate attention or priority to intercultural concerns in a very crowded, if not overlooked, professional renewal, school improvement agenda" (p.16). They argued that this was a lost opportunity to facilitate discussion and debate amongst teachers regarding interculturalism.

Aims

Having set the research question, i.e. 'How best can the integration of children from diverse ethnic backgrounds be promoted in our school?' three main aims were identified

- To identify children from diverse ethnic backgrounds attending the school
- To explore the backgrounds and cultures of these ethnic groups
- To foster more tolerant and understanding attitudes towards other nationalities in the school community.

Main contribution

The method of inquiry chosen was "action research", because of the critical importance of the reflective nature of such research, and is best summed up by Mc Kernan (1996): "The practitioner is not cast as an expert but as an inquirer and co-learner treating his or her practice as provisional" (p. 34). In this case, the ultimate aim was to improve the quality of action i.e. to increase the effectiveness of teachers' practices in relation to the integration of pupils from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

The pupils first set about identifying the children from diverse ethnic backgrounds in the school (a total of 12 classes, 365 children). This information identified 15 families and nine countries from which children from diverse ethnic backgrounds had enrolled in the school within the previous five years. The families completed a questionnaire and returned them to the classroom, where pupils, at a later stage, recorded the information onto audio files using their own voices and speaking in the third person.

Pupils researched the historical and geographical backgrounds of the countries from which identified families had come, through the use of the Internet. Another stage involved the transfer of data using digital tools such as audio files, Word, PowerPoint and Photo Story and producing clay animation films using the "Frames" software.

Another aspect of the study involved parents of ethnic minority children, showcasing national costumes and national foods in the school hall. The final phase of the study involved building a web-project incorporating all the work that pupils had completed and the completed project can be viewed at www.teachnet.ie/rward/wholiveshere

Introduction

The aim of this study was to develop children's awareness and knowledge of cultural diversity. By exploring the backgrounds and cultures of different ethnic groups attending a primary school, it was hoped that more tolerant and understanding attitudes would be fostered in the school community.

Methodology

The study was of a qualitative nature and primarily involved action research and the keeping of a personal diary. According to Winter (1989), action research provides the necessary link between self-evaluation and professional development. As such, the process involves reflection or the development of understanding. It also involves changes in practice. This method of inquiry was chosen because of the critical importance of the reflective nature of action research, and is best summed up by Mc Kernan (1996): "The practitioner is not cast as an expert but as an inquirer and co-learner treating his or her practice as provisional" (p. 34). As such, emphasis is set on attempting to diagnose and solve a problem within a specific context. In this case, the ultimate aim was to improve the quality of action i.e. promote the integration of ethnic minority children in our school. The diary provided a means for me to record changes, difficulties and discoveries made during the project. Notes were made of personal reflections that related to me as a teacher and to changes I witnessed in the culture of our classroom. These notes were generally written up after school when the "To do" and "Done" tasks were being planned and recorded.

Research. The pupils first set about identifying the children from diverse ethnic backgrounds in the school. Due to the size of the school and possible difficulties that could arise concerning meeting with, communicating with, and interviewing pupils outside of our classroom, we decided to restrict the research to pupils from third to sixth classes (a total of 12 classes, 365 children). A form was sent to each classroom teacher involved, requesting the teachers to furnish the information required. This information identified 15 families and nine countries from which children from diverse ethnic backgrounds had enrolled in the school within the previous five years. We then contacted these families seeking permission to gather information from them using a specifically drawn-up interview sheet. Contact was made through the classroom pupils who knew the families or who were related to them. The completed questionnaires were returned to the classroom, where pupils at a later stage recorded the information onto audio files using their own voices and speaking in the third

person, e.g. 'Elizabeth was born in Australia. As a child she…'

The next stage of the project involved children researching the historical and geographical backgrounds of the countries from which identified families had come. Pupils worked in groups of three or four, deciding on which country they wished to gather information about and on what aspects. Much of the research was done using the internet. We set aside one hour per day when pupils accessed the classroom computers and the school computer room. However, much of this work was done by the pupils after school, meeting in their respective homes. A fuller description can be found in the school based project report.

The use of digital tools. At the end of the three weeks, pupils had gathered all the information that they required. The next stage involved deciding on what tools should be used to present the pupils' findings. The pupils were already familiar with using PowerPoint, Microsoft Word and with making audio files and therefore easily transferred their data using one of these digital tools. Some pupils felt that the study should be enlarged to address the problems of bullying and racism, as it seemed to be an issue experienced by children from diverse ethnic backgrounds. The pupils were keen on producing some type of visual material that could highlight this problem. I demonstrated how to use the Frames software (formerly Videoblender) in the classroom and pupils were very eager to try it out. When they had completed their audio, Word, PowerPoint and Photo Story files, they set about producing some clay animations using the Frames software. The different presentational aspects of the project and the digital tools that were used in presenting them are to be found in the school based project report.

During this whole process of researching, discussing and producing, the pupils often expressed different ideas on how they wished the project to progress. During one discussion on how the project could be made more practical from the point of view of addressing the integration of ethnic minority children in our school, one pupil forwarded the idea of having a food fair at which different nationalities could bring their national food to the school. All pupils felt that this would be a good way of promoting integration, as love of food was something that most people had in common! A letter was sent to parents of ethnic minority children, inviting them to showcase food in the school hall. It proved very successful with parents, teachers and children mixing together for the first time. Pupils photographed the occasion and later produced a Photo Story www.teachnet.ie/rward/wholiveshere/worldfoodfair.htm

The web project. The final phase of the study involved deciding on how best to showcase the work that the pupils had done. As already mentioned, the pupils were eager to build a web project. They felt that the project could be of benefit to other children in other schools who wished to address issues relating to multiculturalism. They were also anxious that the study could be seen by as many people as possible, especially by parents and families.

Using Dreamweaver software, the pupils decided on the basic layout of pages, i.e. colour, font size, use of captions, titles and images. I inserted the different files that pupils had built onto the pages, and as this work progressed, pupils made comments and suggestions, leading to drafting and redrafting, until we felt that the work was concise, informative and aesthetically acceptable
www.teachnet.ie/rward/wholiveshere/index.htm

Ethical dimensions of the study

Some ethical issues arose concerning the interviewing of parents who had been born in other countries. The initial idea was for pupils to audio-record these interviews. Some parents expressed reservations about this. One parent did not wish to divulge any information regarding her own personal history nor of her present circumstances. In order to overcome these issues, we formulated an interview sheet, with general questions that did not identify nor impinge on anyone's personal details. The parents concerned were happy to give information regarding their country of origin, their childhood experiences and how the transition to Ireland affected them.

A second ethical issue that arose concerned the use of pupils' names at the end of documents which the children produced. The pupils were very keen that they would have ownership of work created, i.e. that other pupils would not get the credit for research that they did! As this project would be published on the internet, it was very important that pupils could not be identified. Having discussed this issue with the children, they agreed that only their first names would appear with any documents.

A third issue that arose was the publication of photographs of the pupils working on the project. Again, I explained the dangers to the children and we agreed that any photographs used could not identify a pupil, i.e. that a pupil's face would be turned away. I was surprised at how quickly the children adapted to this rule. Once a camera was in use, they automatically turned away.

Limitations of the study

This study evolved over time. Initially, the plan was for pupils to research and study countries from which children from diverse ethnic backgrounds in our school had come. However, as the work progressed, pupils identified other areas that fitted under the umbrella of our study. The study of multiculturalism covers a vast range of issues and by its nature is open ended. The scope of this study was limited by time. The children involved were finishing primary school at the end of June 2007, so we set deadlines in order to have the project finished before school closed for the summer. Phase 1 of the study, which started in February 2007, involved identifying the children from diverse ethnic backgrounds in the school and exploring the historical and geographical backgrounds of their countries. Phase 2, which began following the Easter holidays in early April, involved exploring social issues that arose in relation to immigration and integration in a new society.

Findings

As already reported I kept a daily diary of the study as it progressed. This diary forms the basis for the findings, which are now presented. In reporting, my reflections include challenges faced by me as a teacher, changes that occurred within the culture of our classroom and reactions of pupils to the varying aspects of the project.

One of the main problems that arose during the early research period was the difficulty that pupils experienced in evaluating and summarising information. Initially many groups inserted words relating to their area of interest, e.g. costumes, Italy, flags, into a search engine and accepted the first information at hand. They also directly copied and pasted the information they found, regardless of the source. In order to set criteria to the quality and relevance of information, and also to avoid plagiarism, we set up times during the week when groups would present information/findings to the rest of the class. Feedback was given to the group involved by other pupils and by myself. When it was felt that changes were needed, the group would redraft their work and re-present at the next feedback session.

As outlined in *The Educational Uses of Digital Storytelling, 2008*, the making of clay animation films involved different stages of development. Following a planning stage, pupils made clay figures and backgrounds, and then proceeding to photograph scenes for their stories. The pupils' enthusiasm to produce clay animation films led to some problems during the initial planning stage. Poor planning and inadequate storyboarding on their part did not produce good-quality films. As a teacher, I had to

resist the temptation to intervene by insisting that proper planning take place. It was only when the finished product, i.e. the clay animation film, was produced that many pupils realised and accepted how important planning was as a stage in developing a strong message in visual form, reflecting Papert's emphasis on "learning to learn" (p. 11) For many, it was back to basics again! The final films were produced using Frames www.teachnet.ie/rward/wholiveshere/clayanimation.htm

Children's responses. The project allowed all pupils to participate, lending support to the evaluation report of the BECTA DV Pilot Project, 2002, which stated that different learning styles and abilities were accommodated through the use of digital tools (p.6). One pupil in this class, Mark,[1] is diagnosed with DiGeorge syndrome, a mild learning disability that makes it difficult for him to concentrate or focus for any sustained period of time. Although he has good oral skills, he underachieves in literacy. Mark showed great enthusiasm when this study started. He had difficulty summarising and recording information in Word or PowerPoint forms. However, he excelled when pupils moved on to using clay animation. Being artistic, he enjoyed making clay figurines and painting backgrounds for his film scenes. He also planned his storyboards carefully. He showed great patience and focus as he photographed each frame of his film. The use of IT tools had engaged him for prolonged periods of time, much to my surprise and to the surprise of his parents.

It would seem from pupils' responses that, apart from feeling stimulated and inspired in this type of learning environment, pupils found the use of digital tools practical and effective in relation to creating artifacts or "objects to think with" (Papert, 1980, p.11). One example of this was when pupils were attempting to create a scene in which an immigrant was splashed by a passing car, and laughed at by onlookers. The pupils attempted to take digital photographs of water splashing, with little success. Eventually, one of the pupils suggested that they embed a caption declaring "Splash" in the film. Problem solved! This examination of real-life situations developed "a sense of empathy for those who are discriminated against" (NCCA, 2005, p.22).

The comment "It was different to normal work" encapsulates the changes that came about in the classroom, causing me to reflect on my own personal pedagogy and teaching approaches.

Teacher reflection. A cursory examination of notes kept in my diary reveals jottings such as (7th March) "Kids are rushing to make the interactive puzzles-not

enough planning/gathering information". One refers to the problem of "Speaking too fast" on sound recordings (Feb. 18th). Another notes "Teacher decision or Class decision" (Feb. 15th). A darker side of the project is revealed in a note written on 16th March: "Never again!" referring to difficulties we experienced trying to upload files to a server.

As a teacher with thirty years experience in the classroom, the Constructionist approach, as adopted for this project, was quite a challenge from the traditional teaching approaches that I had used in lessons, "provoking challenges to existing values and beliefs about learning" (Butler, 2007, p.64). Initially I treated this study as an "extra" that my class would be involved in. One major concern I had was that the study would interfere with the long term planning for sixth class. I was quite surprised when I set out the Curriculum Mapping Standards to discover that not only had my class plan of work been completed but that the learning principles that characterise the learning processes (PSC, Introduction, p.8) had also been implemented.

The ease with which pupils embraced digital technology surprised me. Lines of demarcation between teacher and pupils became blurred at times so that the interaction between me and the pupils was more akin to one of partners or co-workers. A general election had been called in 2007 and the Minister for Foreign Affairs happened to live quite close to our school. Some of the pupils had met him while he was canvassing and came up with the idea of interviewing him in relation to immigration. Contact was made with him and he was only too delighted to come to talk to the pupils in our classroom, especially with an election looming! Some pupils interviewed him; some took photographs to make a PhotoStory and others videoed the visit www.teachnet.ie/rward/wholiveshere/visit%20of%20minister.html

The learning environment of the classroom changed as pupils formed groups of varying numbers and abilities, depending on what aspect of the project they were involved in. This "new" setting, reflecting the pedagogical principles of the Primary School Curriculum (Introduction, p.8) allowed for better integration of curriculum subjects e.g. while one group researched and constructed national costumes, another group was developing a PowerPoint presentation of the history of the country, while another group interviewed and made sound recordings of parents who had emigrated from the country.

As highlighted in the literature review (NCCA, 2005), this study helped create contexts in which discussion and exploration could take place in a collaborative nature.

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[1] Mark is a pseudonym used to protect the identity of the pupil.

Pupils became confident and skilled at problem solving. At one stage, when we had problems regarding parents of ethnic minority children not wishing to be interviewed (cf. Ethical dimensions of the study. P.14), one of the children suggested that we draw up a questionnaire with which to ask parents relevant questions, and then tell their stories digitally (using pseudonyms) in sound recordings. While one comment "Our group really enjoyed the clay animation. I think people will not be bullying anymore" can seem perhaps a little naive, it does illustrate the link the children made between the artifacts and the message delivered in their digital videos.

Reaction of pupils' parents. The parents of the pupils carrying out the study attended a function in our school hall, at which the project was explained and presented to them. One parent commented that she was surprised at the wide range of subject areas that had been addressed by the study and that she felt her son had learned much more by participating in this type of study than if he had been learning from textbooks. Quite a few parents showed surprise at the children's level of competence in IT skills, and at how well these skills integrated with the learning process. Another parent talked about how excited and animated the children were when they were working at the study. It had made learning interesting and enjoyable.

Reaction of ethnic minority parents. The parents of children from diverse ethnic backgrounds in the school also showed great interest and involvement in the study. They were delighted to have been invited to showcase their national foods at the World Food Fair. Many actually came dressed in their national costumes and brought their families. One of these parents said that it was the first time she had stood in the school, although she had three children attending it. She felt that she was being made feel welcome and that she had something to offer, a sign perhaps of integration at work. It was evident that these parents appreciated that the school was both interested in, and willing to learn about their diverse cultures.

Implications

The project heightened awareness amongst teachers, pupils and parents of how the school had changed in recent years with the growing number of children from diverse ethnic backgrounds. It created opportunities for integration between all ethnic minority groups, both pupils and parents. It heightened awareness of the need for the development of school policies regarding multiculturalism and integration. It is hoped to extend this study, at a later stage, to examine how immigrant children are performing academically at school.

Conclusion

This study proved to be a positive experience for me, as a teacher, and also for the pupils. Although it started off with the aim of examining the historical and geographical backgrounds of children from diverse ethnic backgrounds, it evolved to also examine other issues such as emigration, immigration, bullying and racism. The cross-curricular nature of the study allowed me to fulfill the requirements of the curriculum for my class in an integrated way, i.e. subjects such as history, geography, social and personal health education, art and English were covered without losing focus on the main theme of our study.

The constructionist approach to the project created a different learning environment in my classroom. Through the use of digital technologies, the learning and teaching process was much enhanced. At differing times pupils could be found in the IT room creating PowerPoint presentations or researching, while other groups of pupils were constructing figurines for clay animation films. As alluded to earlier, teacher and pupil roles changed from the traditional manner. There were times when I wondered who exactly was driving the teaching and learning! We all became collaborative learners during the process. It was a journey that had a forceful effect on my teaching approaches, causing me to reflect on exactly what constituted "learning". The scale of attention, interest, ability and exuberance of class pupils showed me the paramount importance of setting assignments or activities that are of interest to pupils, which in turn leads to effective and meaningful learning.

Development of pupils' skills. From the pupils' points of view, it would seem from their feedback that the experience was both enjoyable and positive. The study allowed them to develop skills such as researching, analysing, summarising, collating and presenting information. They experienced working in collaboration with peers, with their teacher and with adults. They employed a wide range of IT tools, allowing them to develop skills in word processing, in making PowerPoint presentations, interviewing using audio equipment, constructing animations and capturing still images. The study also allowed for differentiation within the class. Lower ability pupils not only participated but experienced success in completing their work.

The school community. The study had a strong impact on the school community. The World Food Fair, the visit of the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the project information night heightened awareness amongst teachers, pupils and parents of how our school has changed in recent years with the growing number of children from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

It created opportunities for integration between all ethnic minority groups, both pupils and parents. It heightened awareness of the potential for bullying and racism and created a forum for discussion on these issues.

If the aspiration of "developing a more inclusive classroom environment and providing children with the knowledge and skills they need to participate in the multicultural Ireland of today" (INTO, 2006, p.4) is to be met, and if attitudes are to change from one of exclusion to one of inclusion, then schools need to develop policies relating to the management of diversity. Lorde, (1993, p.4) states "We have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals". It is hoped that this study, in some small way, provides a forum for discussion and a model for the introduction of "living diversity" (Rosado, 1997, p.6) in our schools.

Literature review

In this literature review I examine changes that have come about in Irish society due to the increase in the number of ethnic minority groups. Racism and bullying are highlighted as particular difficulties experienced by these groups. Efforts by the Irish Government to address these concerns are outlined. Issues relating to managing diversity have been considered before introducing the theories of learning that form the theoretical framework for this study. Two models of constructionist learning which use digital technologies are discussed, with particular emphasis being placed on the use of digital storytelling as a forum for exploring cultural diversity.

Interculturalism. "In order to teach you, I must know you" -Unknown Native Alaskan educator Over the last 20 years Irish society has changed significantly. In the late 1980's approximately 50,000 Irish born people emigrated annually (Mc Gorman and Sugrue, 2007). During the boom time of the "Celtic Tiger" Ireland experienced an unprecedented level of immigration. The Minister for Social Affairs, Séamus Brennan TD, speaking at a press release[2] in January 2006, disclosed that Ireland's continuing economic success was attracting an average of 20,000 Irish people back to Ireland every year. Coupled with the return of Irish people was the increase in the population of non-Irish. The 2002 Census indicated that 5.8 per cent of the population was classed as non-Irish (Central Statistics Office, Census 2002) while the 2006 Census found that almost 10 per cent of the State's residents were non-Irish nationals (Healy, 2007).

In response to the huge influx of ethnically diverse children enrolling in Irish schools, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) published guidelines entitled "Intercultural Education in the Primary School" (NCCA, 2005). These guidelines aimed to support teachers, school management and other members of the school community in "developing a more inclusive classroom environment and to provide children with the knowledge and skills they need to participate in the multicultural Ireland of today" (INTO, 2006, p.4). The guidelines stated, "It is education which promotes equality and human rights, challenges unfair discrimination, and promotes the values upon which equality is built" (NCCA, p.3). The document argued that schools have a role to play in facilitating the development of a child's intercultural skills, attitudes, values and knowledge and that "intercultural education is concerned with ethnicity and culture and not simply skin colour" (p.4). Recommendation 6 of the report suggests "that schools develop a comprehensive policy on intercultural education, including racism and anti-racism" (p.152).

The need for the development of a comprehensive intercultural policy is evident when one considers that in a survey of ethnic minority attitudes in Ireland, (Loyal and Mulcahy, 2001), 78 per cent of more than 600 respondents from a variety of ethnic minorities living all over Ireland highlighted that they had been victims of racism. In addition, 80 per cent of the sample tended to agree that racism is a serious problem in contemporary Ireland, and 80 per cent of the sample believed that not enough was being done to educate the public about racism.

Intercultural education. Chapter two of the NCCA (2005) report highlights characteristics of contemporary good practice in intercultural education. The report recommends that children should be encouraged to examine situations that involve conflict or disagreement between ethnic groups. The examination of real-life situations "can play a role in developing in the child a sense of empathy for those who are discriminated against" (NCCA, 2005, p.22). The document recommends that schools create contexts in which discussion and exploration could take place, rather than simply lecturing to children on right and wrong. This context allows for children to build intercultural competence and the ability to challenge prejudicial beliefs, attitudes and actions (p.23). The context can be created through co-operative learning

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http://www.welfare.ie/EN/Press/PressReleases/2006/Pages/pr310106.aspx

opportunities, allowing children to work closely with people from different social and ethnic groups as "Relationships between children of different groups have been demonstrated to improve significantly if mixed-group co-operative learning strategies are used, irrespective of the context that is covered" (p. 44).

Reaction to guidelines. In 2005 the NCCA guidelines were distributed to every primary school teacher in the country. However, two factors militated against their realisation. The Primary Curriculum Support Programme (PCSP) and the School Development Planning Support (SDPS) were providing a major initiative on curriculum reform at this time. Consequently as Mc Gorman and Sugrue (2007) indicate "many practitioners did not attach adequate attention or priority to intercultural concerns in a very crowded, if not overlooked, professional renewal, school improvement agenda" (p.16). They argued that this was a lost opportunity to facilitate discussion and debate amongst teachers regarding interculturalism. Secondly, a follow up in action to the distribution was not implemented. In order for the guidelines to become a reality, policy development and in-service training under the guidance of a trained facilitator would have been required. Coolahan (2000) asserts that "The issuing of school plans or mission statements needs to be followed through with continuous attention so that the daily attitudes within the school are consistent with official policy" (p.117).

Managing diversity. Rosado (1997) states that the number of ethnically diverse students sitting in the classroom does not make a school multicultural. All this does is demonstrate that ethnically diverse students have gained access to the school. "At the heart of what makes a school multicultural lies managing diversity…..which includes changing mindsets as well as the underlying culture of a school, especially if this culture is what is impeding change" (p.10). Korn and Bursztyn (2002) focus attention on two main issues, relating to teachers and to parents, which schools need to focus on when addressing multicultural education. Firstly, they maintain that the silence concerning issues of race and class needs to be broken: "…many teachers, both black and white, fear that they will be isolated or rejected by fellow staff members if they speak openly about issues of race and class" (p.60). In addition, they stress that schools need to address ethnic minority parents' sense of powerlessness, caused by "lack of know-how in negotiating the school bureaucracy" (p.61). This "sense of powerlessness" can be reduced by having schools develop a policy of parental involvement encouraging the participation of all parents.

"Recognising that schools are institutions that reflect and shape the society they educate, we must grapple with the needs of all individuals for recognition, dignity and respect and with the needs of groups for preservation and protection of their collective identities" (p.189).

Highlighting the importance of interculturalism, Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997) state that "Schools often work in complicity with cultural reproduction, as teachers innocently operate as cultural gatekeepers who transmit dominant values and protect the common culture" (p. 26). The implications of this are that "Such add-ons can be viewed as a tokenism that perpetuates the power relations of the status quo that paves the way for a kinder, gentler oppression" (p.48). Gillborn (1995) highlights

> "the ability to respond to changing local circumstances and to initiate new programmes and approaches, has long been seen as an essential part of any good educational system. The challenge for intercultural teachers is to bring this out in the lessons they are already using" (p.22).

When it comes to actually introducing intercultural education into the classroom, Ruane et al. (1999), argue that many of the lessons currently taught by teachers can be used to celebrate diversity and to promote equality. As such, it does not need to be understood as a new subject: "Many of the values, attitudes, skills and knowledge of intercultural education are already integrated into the curriculum" (p.22).

The Primary Curriculum. The Primary School Curriculum was developed by the NCCA and launched in 1999. The introduction to the Primary School Curriculum (PSC) notes that the process of revising the curriculum began with the work of the Review Body on the Primary Curriculum, which published its report (The Quinlan Report) in 1990. The report constituted a detailed appraisal of the 1971 curriculum and provided the basis for the redesign and restructuring that is presented in this curriculum. The principles (p.8) that underpin the curriculum state that

• Learning is most effective when it is integrated

• Skills that facilitate the transfer of learning should be fostered

• Higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills should be developed

• Collaborative learning should feature in the learning process

•The range of individual difference should be taken into account in the learning process

• Assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning.

Amongst the range of learning principles that characterise the learning processes are

• The child's sense of wonder and natural curiosity is a primary motivating factor in learning

• The child is an active agent in his or her learning

• Learning is developmental in nature

• The child's existing knowledge and experience form the base for learning

• The child's immediate environment provides the context for learning

• Learning should involve guided activity and discovery methods

• Language is central in the learning process

• The child should perceive the aesthetic dimension in learning

• Social and emotional dimensions are important factors in learning

Constructivist approaches are central to this curriculum and attention is now drawn to a theory of learning that forms the theoretical framework on which this study is based.

Constructivism. According to Ernst von Glasersfeld (1996), Jean Piaget is "the most prolific constructivist in our century" (p.125). Piaget suggested that, through processes of accommodation and assimilation, individuals construct new knowledge from their experiences. When individuals assimilate knowledge, they incorporate new experiences into an already existing framework without having to change that framework. In contrast, accommodation may be seen as failure to incorporate experiences into an existing framework. This causes puzzlement or disequilibration for the individual, and leads to a reformation of the existing framework in order to accommodate the new experience comfortably, leading to learning. Thus, learners construct knowledge out of their experiences.

Constructivism is not a theory about teaching, "It's a theory about knowledge and learning" (Brooks and Brooks, p.7). According to Von Glasersfeld (1991), and Pravat and Floden (1994), knowledge is socially constructed. In other words, students/learners construct knowledge out of their experiences, by learning and doing. In constructivist learning environments "instruction begins with the introduction of a problem rather than with the explanation of a concept, theory or set of facts" (Boethel and Dimock, 1999, p.12).

Vygotsky (1978) argues that a child constructs meaning through practical experience and that speech connects this meaning with the world shared by the child in his/her culture. He proposed a zone of proximal development, where learners deal with tasks just beyond their current level of activity, and defined this zone of proximal development as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p.86). Teachers can act as facilitators, asking questions that help to examine learners' ideas more deeply and productively. This assessment is seen as a continuous and interactive process. In such a learning environment the "teachers' roles shift from dispensing knowledge to helping learners construct more viable conceptions of the world" (Jonassen et al., 1999, p.13).

In summary, the theory of constructivism suggests that learners construct knowledge out of their experiences. It is associated with pedagogical approaches that promote active learning, or learning by doing. Both teacher and student are involved in learning from each other (Holt and Willard-Holt, 2000), making the learning experience both subjective and objective. Collaboration amongst learners is emphasised. Students learn from new information by building upon knowledge that they already have. Duit (1995) states, "The activity has to be in the head of the students" (p.281). Learning is accomplished through experimentation rather than being told what happens.

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Biography

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