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# **The Role of Culture in the development of Identity in Diverse Education Settings**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper examines the literature on culture and the construction of identity in educational contexts in Ireland, and addresses how difference is dealt with in the institutional, policy and practical educational arenas. This is within the context of ongoing research on how the Irish Education system accommodates culturally diverse population. The paper first investigates the concept of Culture education and considers the role of school systems as reproductive and transformative agents, in a general sense and specifically in the Irish context. It then looks at cultural forces shaping these norms, and develops this against the social, cultural and demographic changes in Irish society over the last decade.*

## **Introduction**

This paper looks at the literature that deals with notions of culture and the construction of identity in educational contexts in Ireland and by doing so will attempt to answer the question of how difference is dealt with in the institutional, policy and practical educational arenas. It will do so within the context of a larger piece of ongoing research which is concerned with how the Irish Education system accommodates the opportunities and challenges presented by a culturally diverse population.

The paper prefaces the broader research by setting out to look at the literature on Culture as a concept in educational contexts and will consider the role played by school systems as both reproductive and transformative agents in society in a general sense and also how these dynamics play out in the Irish context. Following on from this the paper will look at the cultural forces at play in shaping and creating these norms. These themes will be developed against the background of the greater social, cultural and demographic changes which have taken place in Irish society over the last decade.

## **Culture in Educational contexts**

Culture, its composition, nature and role has long featured in debates about the role of schooling and school systems in society. Culture, according to Ross (2003) 'can be seen as a difficult term' with Williams (1983, p. 76) in Peim and Hodgkinson (2007, p387) suggesting that 'culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language'. Peim and Hodgkinson (ibid, p389) go on to state that 'any study that engages with the dimension of culture... must inevitably address, implicitly or explicitly, the interplay between the larger context 'the world', and the local context of practice'. This location of culture within local and global contexts sees culture co-existing in dual realities where 'the larger idea of culture may refer to a number of dimensions of being:

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the way of life, the belief systems and practices of a people; but the same term, culture, is used to refer to institutions—and even to smaller units of social space within institutions’ (ibid, p391).

The role of education in influencing culture and being influenced by the cultural context within which it operates is evident in educational and social discourse.

Addressing culture within any educational context necessarily has a doubleness about it. There is the culture that prevails within—within a sector, within an institution, within a department, within a teaching space; but there is also the cultural context in a wider sense to take into consideration, and the way that any local, specific practice is, one way or another, an expression of the culture at large (ibid, p390).

Jurgena (2003) suggests that ‘a leading role in the formation of cultural identity is played by education’ and cites Shiyonov’s (1991) claim that ‘culture is a unity of knowledge, senses, communication, and creative activity’. Spinthourakis and Katsillis (2003, p93) contend that ‘few would argue with the premise that education is based on the knowledge, beliefs and the values of a society. Through formal and informal means, the education system promotes the learning of elements of its culture to develop productive members of society’.

The role played by individuals in the development of culture and the role played by that culture in the development of individuals is also of great importance and creates a complex and nuanced relationship where ‘cultures, then, are both structured and structuring, and individuals’ actions are neither totally determined by the confines of a learning culture, nor are they totally free’ (Hodkinson et al, 2007, p419).

### ***Cultural transmission and the teacher***

Ross (2003, p4) claims that education is still a force for the transmission of cultural norms and ideals and that the schools agents, teachers, and the processes engaged in their training and development, are crucial focal points for debate and consideration: ‘education has a particular role to play in the maintenance of culture. Teachers are professionalised agents of cultural transmission. Schools institutionalise culture: the schooling process and the curriculum define what will be the culture of the next generation’. Those who educate teachers in this highly political act (transmission and formation of cultural values) are charged with great responsibility as ‘super-cultural transmitters’ (ibid) and that this activity is fluid and mutable ‘what we are doing is not neutral. Nor is it static: our societies are changing, and we are in the thick of the debate about what should be conserved and what should be different about tomorrow’s society’ (ibid). Ross (2003) maintains that the formal curriculum is not the only medium for the transmission and development of cultural norms but that the “hidden curriculum” through for example the ‘staffing of our schools conveys important messages about the culture that we wish to transmit. In an age when the notion of culture is becoming increasingly plural and diverse, we need to ensure that the teaching force – in both schools and in higher education institutions – reflects the composition of our society’ (ibid, p217). He advances a number of key reasons for this assertion. Because learning is

both 'a formative activity' and 'a social process' then 'the people who take on the role of teacher play a critical part in determining the social relationships within which learning occurs' (ibid). Another reason advanced by Ross concerns the lack of visibility of members of ethnic communities in positions of power and authority in the wider activities of societies. Teachers, he maintains, occupy a critical role in society being 'the one face of civil society that every child will meet, every working day, through the whole of their formal education. It is therefore particularly critical that this 'face' of civil power be seen, visibly and explicitly, to represent all of our society' (ibid) and that in order for the teaching establishment to reflect the linguistic, ethnic and religious diversity of our modern populations that 'our educational system needs to be delivered by teams of professionals who can match that range, in their explicit practice and in their subconscious behaviour and attitudes' (ibid, p218).

### **Culture, Curriculum and the recognition of diversity**

Cultural transmission through curriculum planning is also a key consideration in these contexts with curricula needing to reflect and understand the diversity found within modern classrooms. Despite common, anecdotal misapprehensions, high rates of diversity do not contribute to greater levels of school failure with research carried out by PISA (OECD, 2002-2005) revealing that 'the countries which achieve the best school results are those in which there is a higher level of diversity. It therefore becomes necessary to include positive cultural references which can act as models for children from the different ethnic groups present in schools' in addition PISA suggests that 'inclusion of people with different origins and from different cultural minorities is a point of reference in schools not only for the children who identify themselves with them, but also for the rest of society since they are a key factor in order to help overcome the stereotypes and prejudices which exist in these communities' (ibid). Research conducted by Includ-Ed (2007) and carried out in a pan-European context, further suggests that academic benefits not only accrue to those minority groupings but that a recognition and celebration of diversity tends to benefit the entire school community: 'cultural and religious diversity within school frameworks create wide benefits both for pupils from cultural minorities and for all other members of educational communities. When the process of cultural and religious recognition is not against pupils' learning, this diversity increases academic performances (p4). This point is reiterated by the PISA research which claims that 'pupils in integrated education systems on average perform better than those in selective education systems do, and that their educational performance is less dependent on their background' (OECD 2005:89).

Another important factor which needs to be recognised within curricular frameworks in order for diversity to develop and flourish concerns the distance between school and home life experienced by members of cultural and ethnic minorities. Palaiologou (2007), citing a range of research perspectives (Cowen & Hightower, 1986; Ladd & Price, 1987; Cowen et al., 1989; Ladd, 1990), claims that 'children experience difficulties in the learning domain as well as in their social behaviour and communication when they enter a new environment or one different from their family environment'. In addition, Campbell citing Baker, 1997, claims that 'students from bicultural backgrounds suffer from what is called home/school disarticulation where the norms, values, attitudes and beliefs of the family unit differ from those of the education system, thereby alienating

the student and the student's family from the education system' (p34). However, Campbell goes on to say that being from a bicultural background is not in itself a disadvantage as 'it may heighten the individual's awareness of cultural differences between self and others and the fact that not everyone in the world has the same norms, values, beliefs and attitudes' (ibid, p37).

The findings of Villegas (1991) and Ladson-Billings (1995, 2001) cited in Chan (2007) point to the 'abundance of research highlighting the need for culturally relevant pedagogy'. Chan (ibid, p180) also cites the work of Banks (1995) Igoa (1995) and Cummins (1996) who raise the importance of 'culturally-sensitive curricula that build on the experiences and knowledge that students of ethnic-minority background bring to a school context'. Banks et al (2005, p7) place the relevance of culturally-sensitive curricula in a broader social context by claiming that the provision of such curricula is essential in order to 'secure the liberties of cultural, ethnic, language, and religious groups and enable them to experience freedom, justice, and peace. Citizens who understand this unit-diversity tension and act accordingly do not materialize from thin air; they are educated for it'.

### ***Cultural transmission and diversity in Irish contexts***

If, as we have seen above, schools, their agents and their curricular orientations have a role in cultural formation and promulgation in a broader international sense, how do these dynamics play out in the Irish context? In order to explore this it is necessary to look at recent developments in education in Ireland and the broader social context within which it operates.

Over the last 15 years Ireland has experienced an unprecedented rate of growth in both social and economic terms. This transformation, popularly characterised as the Celtic Tiger, has impacted on many parts of Irish life. One consequence of change has been a considerable increase in inward migration from a range of countries within and beyond Europe whose populations see Ireland as a place of continuing opportunity.

Key areas of Irish life such as transport and communication infrastructure, health service provision, and education have been affected by the rise in the rate of inward migration which resulted from the Government's decision to allow free movement of labour into Ireland from the ten new EU accession states. According to the most recent census of population conducted in April 2006 the population of the Republic of Ireland stood at 4.24 million persons. This was an increase of 323,000 persons or 8.2 per cent compared with the April 2002 figure and this figure of over 4.2 million represents the highest population in 150 years.

Of the usually resident persons present in the State on the night of the census in April 2006, 420,000 (or 10% of total population) had a nationality other than Irish — up from 224,000 (or 5.8% of total population) four years earlier. Of these 420,000 non-Irish persons approximately 275,000 were of EU nationality, 24,000 from the rest of Europe, 35,000 from Africa, 47,000 from Asia and 21,000 from America. A breakdown of the figures for those from the EU member states reveal some interesting trends with for example over 110,000 people from the United Kingdom living in Ireland on the night of the census and over 100,000 people from the combined populations of Polish,

Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians resident in the State on that night. These demographic changes have according to King-O'Riain, (2006: p4) 'added to the rich diversity that always existed in Ireland' while Keogh (2003: p3) suggests that while such 'cultural diversity is not new in Ireland... our response to that cultural diversity through the development of interculturalism is just emerging'. Devine (2005) finds that this social transformation takes place in a country where up to very recently 'the vast majority of the population has traditionally been classified as white, sedentary and Roman Catholic'.

Modern Ireland is a place where according to Leavy (2005) 'the children who make up our classrooms represent much greater ethnic composition than has been experienced in the past' but also where, according to Deegan, 2004, cited in Kitching, (2006, p2) 'official discourse has 'intentionally or otherwise' denied culturally diverse realities in contemporary Ireland' and where Kropiwiec and King-O'Riain (2006, p4) express surprise that 'there has been comparatively little research that has been undertaken by or indeed focused on the views and perceptions of people from minority ethnic communities who already live in or have migrated to Ireland'.

This view is supported by Devine (2005, p52) citing Lynch & Lodge (2002) who hold that 'research on post-primary schools also indicates little attention to the management of difference in schools and a tendency among teachers to homogenise students as a group, overshadowing differences that may exist on the basis of religious, cultural, ethnic, sexual and other identities' and also by Kitching (2006, p1) who claims that 'very little is known about the profile of children from minority ethnic groups in Irish schools, to say nothing of their individual experiences. Mainstream discourse around 'race' and ethnicity is confused at best in Ireland' with this situation prompting Kitching to ask 'do we wait until race and ethnicity can be clouded with issues of socioeconomic disadvantage and have our attention drawn away from critically thinking about race and ethnicity in schools?' (ibid). Deegan (2003, p64) adds that, despite a growth in responses to diversity and education at official levels, 'paradoxically we know little about the tacit and taken for granted everyday realities of race, ethnicity, gender, class, beliefs, ability, and community, among other socio-cultural phenomena, in children's lives across classrooms, schools, families and communities'.

Devine (2005, pp54, 55) however voices concerns about a system where 'members of the teaching profession tend to be white, Catholic and sedentary, and therefore very much embedded in the life world of the dominant ethnic group in Irish society. While Ireland has never been an entirely ethnically homogenous society, nonetheless the extent of change in recent years is unprecedented'. She argues that the State plays a role 'through its immigration and educational policies, in framing teacher discourse in inclusionary or exclusionary terms. Such policies, it is argued, are underpinned by a particular concept of Irish/national identity, which positions minority ethnic groups as 'other', with direct implications for both teacher perception of and practice with migrant children in schools' (ibid, pp55, 56). Kitching, (citing Cummins 2001, p320), looks at how school systems can serve to exclude pupils from culturally diverse backgrounds in both policy and classroom realms. These practices would include 'ability grouping and streaming practices, the use of culturally and linguistically biased... tests, teacher education institutions that have sent new teachers into the classroom with minimal

information regarding patterns of language and social development among such pupils and a curriculum that reflects only the experiences and values of middle-class English-speaking pupils and effectively suppresses the experiences and values of culturally diverse pupils’.

Traditionally the Roman Catholic Church has played a decisive role in the provision and management of education in Ireland. That influence still holds today albeit in less visible forms than has been the case with Gleeson (2003) contending that ‘the representatives of the official Catholic Church...have exercised enormous influence in Irish education (Ó Buachalla, 1988; O’Flaherty, 1992; Inglis, 1998). But their concentration has been on management and control (Gleeson, 2000; O’Donoghue, 1999) rather than curriculum issues as exemplified in the course of the education debates that preceded the Education White Paper of 1995 (Gleeson, 2003). Drudy and Lynch (1993) in Killeavy (1999) point out that ‘the churches (particularly the Catholic Church) because of their strong representation on policy making bodies, can have a considerable influence on curriculum development’.

Regardless of the locus of church power in educational contexts it is clear that it still exerts a high degree of control in the vast majority of educational establishments in the country. The education arena is a geographical, physical and intellectual space where the new and emerging demographic and cultural realities in Irish society meet and sometimes collide with tradition and history. This sentiment is echoed by Moriarty (2005) who suggests that Ireland is ‘arguably challenged by the increase in in-migration and this has led to a preoccupation with issues of identity and difference and crucially of race. This is not a unique position within the western world with diversity and associated racism becoming a commonly discussed topic in public culture’. Moriarty goes on to position this debate within the greater global experience citing Sassen, (1998) White, (2001) and Werbner, (2002) who suggest that ‘these discussions are particularly potent within the context of globalisation and the potential for new identity constructions to develop with increasing diasporic movement and associated transnationalism, cosmopolitanism and hybridity’.

## **Conclusion**

Ireland is undergoing a series of changes in its cultural and social landscape which have consequences for the entire society. These changes have impacted on all aspects of Irish life and have caused us to question long held assumptions about ourselves as a people, assumptions which have not always been subjected to the degree of intense public scrutiny that they may deserve. In looking to the effects on our lives of new, diverse populations arriving into the country in recent times we have begun to look at concepts and ideas which are difficult to identify, articulate and interrogate. What story do we tell others about ourselves? What has constituted Irishness in the past, what constitutes it now and what are the forces used in its construction? Where do we receive ideas of our identity from and what role do the official agencies and activities of the State, for example our education system, play in making and moulding this identity? What vision do we have of this identity which will inform future generations? What happens when this cultural creation process meets conflicting cultural norms as represented by new

populations? What form does the process take then and how is this difference negotiated and accommodated?

It could be argued that these questions revolve around the often confused idea of what culture actually is; what is clear perhaps is that the creation and transmission of culture is a fluid and many sided notion and that education plays a pivotal role in this process echoing Ross (2000, p97) who claims that 'the ways in which the curriculum may influence social reproduction may be contested, but the fact that it does have an influence on the nature of future society is no longer an issue. The curriculum has a role in shaping future identities. If social identities and cultures were secure and static, then the role of education in this would not be at issue, but this is not the case in Europe, nor in much of the rest of the world'. Ross further argues that even if there once was a notional idea of stability that this is no longer the case; he contends that this situation is not a concern for some as a many-cultured society has served to liberate previously repressed groups. On the other hand he argues that the prevailing conditions, where society is 'plural and fragmented' and where 'inherited and established patterns and groupings are breaking up' (ibid, p97) is a source of worry for many. Attempts by Governments, through their school curricula, 'to use the educational system to weld together the various parts of society, to ensure that a 'whole' society was reproduced in the future' leads Ross to make the claim that such 'searching for a common identity has its dangers' (ibid) resulting in what he claims would be the emergence of either dominant cultures intent on imposing their will on society or in the fragmentation or 'hybridisation' of culture (ibid).

Culture sometimes has a discernible shape and form but at other times and from other perspectives it is elusive and opaque. It is subject to continuous cycles of negotiation, reinterpretation and re-articulation and is constantly renewed and replenished by exposure to other forms and manifestations. This article provides a context within which this ongoing dialogue between and within cultural understandings can be examined.

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