

Diversity and Inclusion – Challenges and Issues in an Irish Educational Setting

Ailish Jameson and Aiden Carthy
Institute of Technology Blanchardstown, Ireland

Abstract

In Ireland, the issue of cultural inclusion in education has emerged due to significant demographic change, in recent years. Census 2011 statistics demonstrated that, for the period 2006-2011 there was an annual average inward migration of 23,730. This has resulted in major change and diversity in the Irish educational system leading to significant challenges. This research was a micro study conducted in a primary school located in a disadvantaged area of Dublin with a 45% newcomer population. The aim of the study was to investigate the challenges and issues associated with this novel concept of cultural inclusion. The school was designated DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) by the Social Inclusion Unit of the Department of Education and Skills to reflect its high levels of literacy, numeracy and attendance issues. Triangulation was used to gather data with multiple perspectives being explored, namely, staff, students and parents and multiple methodologies utilised. A new and innovative methodology called photo ethnography was used with students which involved them taking photographs of their learning experiences and being facilitated to tell their story through use of the photographs. Core themes of inclusion, classroom management and socialisation were investigated. Key findings were issues in relation to identity, language, religion and resources. Key recommendations were that a Task Force be established to review religious education, that practical, in-service training be provided to staff, that social skills development be increased for students and that strategies are put in place to increase parental involvement in the educational lives of students.

1. Introduction

In Ireland, increased immigration in the past ten years has led to very significant demographic changes, resulting in increased diversity among the

student population in educational establishments [1]. All children, including newcomer children, asylum seekers and refugees have a right to education and must attend school between the ages of six to sixteen years [2]. At present, there is no specific legislation in place in Ireland focusing on inclusion from a cultural perspective with the main piece of anti-discriminatory legislation being the Equal Status Act 2000. Accordingly, one might argue the need for up-to-date legislation to reflect the major demographic and cultural changes in Ireland. Previous research highlighted issues with classroom management, socialisation, training, attitudes and belief systems [3] [4] [5] [6]. A social constructivist approach was adopted in this research which is linked with interpretivism, and examines how individuals seek to gain understanding of the world they live in through meaning attributed to their experiences [7]. Triangulation was used and data collection involved gathering information from three perspectives; staff, students and parents through mixed methodologies of observations, photo ethnography (students only) and in-depth, semi-structured interviews.

2. Background to the study

This research was an in-depth, micro study examining the concept of cultural inclusion and the challenges and issues in a primary school located in a disadvantaged area of Dublin, from the perspectives of staff, students and parents. The study was conducted in a senior primary school established in 1982, designated disadvantaged in 1991, with a student population of 310, 45% of whom were newcomer children [8]. As a senior primary school, children were typically aged eight to thirteen years and completed 3rd to 6th class, respectively. Challenges such as poverty, unemployment, anti-social behavior, intimidation and fear were everyday experiences for many of the children attending the school [8]. The School Mission statement acknowledged that it was an Irish school, a Catholic school and a school that welcomed “all religious

persuasions, ethnic backgrounds and cultures” [9]. Religious instruction was based on Catholic doctrines and beliefs and was open to all children within the school. However, the fundamental aim of the school was to promote the full and holistic development of each child [9].

3. Literature / Previous Research

3.1 Cultural Inclusion

It is argued that multiculturalism is a “descriptive” term and refers solely to the fact that diversity exists and that pluralism is a reality in our society [5]. In the early 1990s, those seeking asylum in Ireland was reported to be 20 to 60 people per year, however, by 1998 this figure had increased to 4,626 [10]. In 1991, statistics demonstrated that 93.8% of people living in Ireland were born in Ireland, however, by 2002 this had reduced to 89.6% [11]. Between May 2004 and September 2005, 133,258 social insurance numbers were issued to immigrant workers from recently joined States in the European Union. Preliminary results from Census 2011 demonstrated that during the period 2006 to 2010, the estimated net migration was 118,650 which is an average of 23,730 per annum [11].

3.2 Studies of Cultural Inclusion

Norberg 2000 found that education was predominantly based around a monocultural perspective and, frequently diversity in the classroom was solely evidenced by a child’s name and appearance. Many teachers argued that this “lack of cultural recognition” was positive as it helped all children assimilate and integrate and did not highlight difference [3]. Therefore, education has remained largely homogenous which could be attributed to teachers’ insecurity, inexperience and anxiety in relation to highlighting cultural differences as they have been linked to “racism, conservatism and right-winged ideologies” [3].

Milner 2005 argued that diversity required teachers to acquire both “pedagogical” and “cultural” knowledge which will lead to an optimal standard of teaching and “meaningful” learning in the classroom [12]. Many teachers adopt “colour-blind ideologies” in their practice which means that they ignore the fact that students are of different colour and adopt the stance that all people are born equally and that everyone experiences the world in the same way [12]. McGorman and Sugrue 2007 conducted a macro study on intercultural education in Ireland. Some of the main findings of this study were the need for policy and practices to become more

heterogeneous in nature to reflect the increased diversity within schools [4]. It found that extra-curricular activities were very important in language acquisition and helping students integrate into the classroom and the community [4]. Many schools reported being under severe pressure due to a lack of resources and supports and there was a need for more autonomy in relation to resource deployment. A further study conducted in Ireland by Ní Chonaill 2009 found major issues in relation to language which led to division among Irish and families of migrant backgrounds [13]. Many Irish families reported reticence at voicing opinions on the changing demography within Ireland for fear of being labeled as racist [13].

In the United Kingdom, Kurawa 2010’s study found that teachers who adopted differentiated methods of teaching had most success with diverse learners, and co-operative learning was found to be an effective strategy in promoting a culturally inclusive learning environment. Classroom management was identified as a key challenge to cultural inclusion and rules and boundaries were cited as a critical teaching strategy [6]. What was key was that the Principal adopt a leadership role and the curriculum be adapted to suit the diverse needs of students. A team based approach was deemed to be most effective as it led to shared expertise and staff training days were an important element in this process [6]. Finally, Marx and Moss 2011 examined the “gap” that exists between teachers and students of different cultures and focused on a pre-service course run for teachers involving “immersion” of them in foreign schools in order to develop their intercultural knowledge and prepare them for teaching in a multicultural educational environment [14]. Marx and Moss 2011 stressed the value of “immersion” programmes for student teachers where they live and work in a country with diverse cultural backgrounds.

3.3 The Irish Educational System

The Department of Education and Skills was established in 1924 and to date, it retains a high degree of power in relation to policy issues and administrative procedures within the system. In Ireland, education is compulsory for children aged six to sixteen years and children typically spend eight years in primary education and then transfer into secondary education [15]. At primary school level, there are seven core curriculum areas; Language (English and Gaelige), Mathematics, Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE) which covers History, Geography and Science, Arts Education (visual arts, music, drama),

Physical Education, Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Religion [16]. In 1999, the primary school curriculum was revised which involved a collaborative process between different parties working within primary education. Two reviews of the curriculum were conducted in 2003 and 2005, respectively.

3.4 Legislation

The Education Act 1998 was a piece of legislation to provide education for every person in the State and set down support services to be provided to students, parents, schools or centres which included assessment procedures, psychological services and adaptation of buildings to enable access [17]. The Equal Status Act 2000 promoted equality and prohibited discrimination in relation to the provision of services and opportunities to the public [18]. Section 3 (c) of the Equal Status Act 2000 stated that if a school operated under a particular religious value system they could admit children of particular denominations and refuse others whose values are not considered to be in line with the ethos of the school [18]. Accordingly, schools of particular religious affiliation can lawfully discriminate against some children over others [4]. The Education for People with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 was the first piece of legislation in Ireland specifically focused on education for people with special educational needs [19]. It must be noted, however, that this Act does not adopt a **rights** based approach and it was envisaged that all sections of the EPSEN Act would be implemented by October 2010. However, arising out of Budget 2009 and the economic downturn this process has now been delayed [20].

4. Methodology

A qualitative approach to data collection was adopted as this research sought to explore the real life experiences of staff, students and parents in their natural settings which is a predominant feature of qualitative research [7]. A social constructivist/interpretivist approach was adopted which focused on the actual experiences of individuals and their interpretations of events in their lives. This research emphasised the principles of participatory research and knowledge acquisition through interactions between the researcher and the researched. Methodological triangulation was used which involved gathering data from three perspectives, staff, students and parents and utilising multiple methodologies.

At the design stage, a core aim was to view the process through the eyes of the child, therefore, creative child-centred methodologies and interview topic guides were developed. A new and innovative methodology, photo ethnography, was selected as an initial methodology to be used with students which involved issuing each student with a camera and a prescribed list of twelve photographs, with the remaining twelve photographs to be of their own choice with a focus on educational experiences. Photographs were developed and mounted on coloured card and each student was interviewed individually and facilitated to tell their story through use of the photographs.

During Phase 1 of the research, random probability sampling was adopted and all staff, students and parents had an equal chance of being selected to participate in the research. Consent forms were distributed to all students, staff and parents. All (100%) of staff in the school consented to the research being conducted, 89% of parents consented and 82% of students consented. Children and parents from the travelling community were removed from the sample as they declined to participate in the research. A purposeful sampling technique was then adopted to determine participants from the three groups. The final sample consisted of eight students, four male, four female, four Irish nationals and four newcomer children. Six staff were selected to participate in the research which consisted of four teachers, one from each year, 3rd to 6th class, two male and two female, together with the Principal and the Home School Liaison Co-Ordinator. It was decided to select the parents of the children sampled to participate in the research as it was felt that this would lend itself very well to comparative research. Out of the eight children sampled, six of the parents agreed to participate in the research, four mothers and two fathers.

Methodologies utilised were in-class observations during teaching time, in-class observations outside teaching time and observations in the school building and the recreation areas. A semi-structured interview template was used when conducting interviews with both staff and parents and topic guides were compiled with core themes of background information, classroom management, inclusion, educational experience and socialisation being investigated. All interviews were audiotaped and field notes were maintained in order to give a sense of the context and the atmosphere in the room which can aid the interview process. Photo ethnography was utilised with students and once completed, film was developed and each student's photographs were placed onto a large piece of coloured card, in display format. Interviews were

held with each student individually and they were facilitated to tell their story, through use of their photographs. It was hoped that this method would facilitate the interview process and maintain a power balance between the researcher and the participants.

5. Results

5.1 Observations

Observations were conducted at a preliminary stage of data collection to explore the theme of socialisation and extended over two lunchtime breaks and two recreation areas. Diverse friendship groupings were observed among students, in particular, those who played sports. Supervision was provided by five teachers and interactions between teachers and students were open and respectful. The aesthetics within the school reflected some diversity with a number of projects on display and world flags hanging in the main corridor. There was an area called the 'sacred space' in all of the mainstream classrooms which contained items and symbols from the Catholic faith such as the Bible, Holy Communion prayers and angels. In one class the 'sacred space' also contained symbols from diverse religions such as Buddhism, Judaism and Islam. In-class observations revealed evidence of paired learning, however, there were issues in relation to classroom management due to diversity of needs within the room. This was exhibited by high noise levels in the room and disruptions from students entering and leaving the classroom for resource support and seating changes taking place for different subjects on the curriculum.

5.2 Staff

All staff reported that the change in student profile happened suddenly and without warning and the expectation was that staff would accommodate these changes with little or no back-up from the State. One teacher stated *"when I arrived it was a big eye opener for me as in that I hadn't seen a primary school in Ireland for a long time"*. Another stated that diversity was *"huge in this class, there's four different religions and an atheist in class as well and that's just religious background and there's probably at least 10, 11 maybe more nationalities in the class"*. Staff reported little or no training at undergraduate level with the emphasis on inclusion of those with disabilities rather than cultural inclusion. While there was no formal induction within the school, the Vice Principal acted as a mentor for all staff in their first year working in the school. In addition, all teaching staff stated that they

received enormous support and guidance from the Principal in the school. All staff reported that the Department of Education and Skills had provided no training to support the major demographic and social changes that have recently occurred in Irish education and that the onus was on the school to put supports and mechanisms in place. One staff member had spent a period of teaching abroad which was cited as being hugely beneficial when teaching a diverse student population.

All staff stressed the important role of parents in promoting a culturally diverse learning environment, however, stated that parental involvement was poor across the spectrum of all nationalities and cultures. One teacher stated that staff were very dependent on parents *"to make sure that the ethos in your school is being developed and being promoted properly"*. The school had a parents association, however, it had to be dissolved because there was not enough involvement in it. Efforts had been made to involve parents in planning and policy development within the school, however, little interest was found among parents. All staff cited Culture Week as a significant event in the school which was a celebration of diversity and multiculturalism.

Staff argued that the current primary school curriculum was tokenistic and did not reflect a culturally diverse student population. One teacher argued that *"in this area of Dublin, 25% of the population are new Irish people yet there is no mention of the cultures of these people in the new curriculum, there's no effort to include their language, there's no effort made to make reference to their countries they have come from"*. All of the teachers stated that the onus was on them to source supplementary materials to promote diversity within the classroom. Staff argued that the SPHE module was not sufficient in educating children on diversity and living in a multicultural society. Staff highlighted differentiation and paired learning as invaluable tools in delivering education in a multicultural classroom. Planning and preparation were identified by all teachers as critical elements in their teaching. Language was highlighted as a key challenge with staff expected to teach a full curriculum to students with varying degrees of English.

Resource teachers were cited by all staff as extremely important in delivering a high standard of education and major fears were expressed by teachers in relation to government budgetary cuts to resource teachers since the economic downturn. One teacher stated *"we're getting resource teachers taken off us year after year like if it ever was a case that you didn't have a resource teacher you'd be lost, that's your complete crutch"*. Staff reported

challenges with parents who refused to permit their children to participate in all aspects of the curriculum. One teacher stated *“you’re seeing a child not allowed watch a video with the rest of the class because it’s not part of their religion”*. The school was located in a disadvantaged area, therefore, staff cited additional challenges with poverty and disadvantage and stated *“we would be very very aware of all the social problems that affect the lives of our children, we would have serious intimidation, we would have an element of crime, we would have gang warfare em we would have feuding, em probably a lot of violence in some homes”*.

One emergent finding among staff was the challenges faced by the current Catholic religious curriculum which was viewed as divisive and exclusionary. Staff stated that there is an over emphasis on religion in the current curriculum and that an excessive amount of time was spent each day solely on the teaching of Catholicism. One teacher stated *“I feel that religion gets way too much time in the programme, I mean we’re told to teach it 12 o’clock to 1230 for half an hour 5 days a week...I think definitely an awareness of Catholic religion that needs to be taught but also an awareness of other religions too”*. Some staff argued that the teaching of religion should not be the responsibility of the school.

Staff reported no significant issues with socialisation among younger children, however, challenges emerged as they got older. All staff argued that many of the issues originated in the home due to parental attitudes on diversity and that any lack of respect or intolerance in the children stemmed from the parents and the home environment. All staff stated that there were minor issues with bullying and racism in the school, however, the school operated a zero tolerance policy, in this regard. Extracurricular activities were stressed by all staff as extremely important in developing socialisation among students. Concern was expressed regarding the current stipulation in the Croke Park Agreement¹ that teachers must work an additional 36 hours on planning and policy and its resultant impact on provision of extracurricular activities which are currently undertaken in staff’s own time.

5.3 Students

Data was gathered from students using multiple methodologies of photo ethnography and semi-

¹ The Croke Park Agreement was published in 2010 and was an agreement between the government and public servants, including educators, to change their working practices in order to improve services to the public. It covers the period 2010-2014.

structured interviews utilising the photographs to facilitate the process. Significant links were made between culture and religion. All Irish students took photographs of the ‘sacred space’ and other Catholic religious artefacts to represent their culture in the classroom. One student also took a photograph of a tin whistle, an Irish musical instrument. One student stated *“we have lots of cultural stuff in it about Jesus and then there’s a cross and all like and then em yeah we had to do lots of fun stuff with religion”*. Newcomer students reported difficulty locating items representing their country of origin in the classroom. All students took photographs of flags in the main corridor to represent their culture within the school. All newcomer students held that focusing on their identity was not really important to them as they were living in Ireland now and considered themselves part of Irish society.

Friends were cited as an integral and extremely important part of students’ school lives. Six students displayed mixed friendship groupings, both in terms of nationality and gender, one Irish student displayed photographs of newcomer children only and one Irish student displayed friendship groupings of Irish children only. Likes included recreation time and friends. Dislikes were represented by subjects on the curriculum for seven students and the school building and homework for one student. All eight students stated that Culture week was a significant event in helping them to understand diverse traditions, customs and beliefs. When asked about conflict with friends or issues in relation to bullying, seven of the students stated that they had never experienced bullying directly and stated that if a situation of bullying did arise they would speak with their parents or teacher. Two newcomer students had experienced issues with racism in the school, however, these had been resolved quickly by staff. When asked about extracurricular activities, seven students were involved in afterschool activities such as the choir, homework club or sporting activities. All students aspired to attend third level education and live and work in Ireland. While newcomer students stated that they would like to return and visit their country of origin, they viewed Ireland as their home.

5.4 Parents

All Irish parents felt it was critical to maintain cultural identity and one stated *“I love that they do all their St. Brigid’s Day and they’re taught the tin whistle, study their Irish and things like that and learn their Irish history”*. One emergent finding was the importance given by newcomer parents to their children becoming part of Irish culture and identity.

However, what was interesting were the challenges faced by newcomer children in relation to identity with many children being told by classmates that they were not Irish. This led to confusion and persistent questioning at home. Some parents expressed surprise that there was not a parents association in place within the school and all parents stated that they would be more involved in the school if they had the time. Parents cited resources as being critically important in a school which was so culturally diverse and fears were expressed among all parents regarding resources being cut. One parent stated *“they (students) are getting enough help for now they are ok if they don’t withdraw the teachers away from them, they really want to cut down on the teachers, but please not to do that”*.

Language emerged as a challenge among Irish parents who felt that it raised issues with resource distribution and time management in class. Parents raised religion as a significant issue and argued that the teaching of Catholicism was divisive in a school with such diverse religious beliefs and led to confusion among students. One Irish parent stated *“schools trying to hold onto their ethos and their religious background is kind of difficult when you have got so many different religious beliefs in a school and I think they have to be a little bit more inclusive”*. Some non-Catholic children did not understand why they could not participate in Catholic religious events such as Holy Communion. All parents felt that a general religion module would be a much better option which would promote and adhere to the principles of inclusivity.

Parents stated that friendship groupings among their children were very diverse and they were happy for their children to mix with children of all nationalities as they believed it helped their socialisation skills. Parents strongly argued that extracurricular activities were critical in the development of socialisation and integration among children from diverse cultural backgrounds. When discussing bullying and racism, one Irish parent argued that a lot of incidents with bullying were overlooked by the school if they involved newcomer children, however, newcomer parents contended that the school tended to believe the Irish children. One emergent finding was the belief by parents that racism was more of an issue in wider Irish society. All parents held high ambitions for their children and desired that they remain in Ireland, attend third level college and gain employment here. All newcomer parents stated that they hoped their children would *“give back to Ireland”* when they are older and were very grateful for the opportunities Ireland afforded them and their families since arriving here.

6. Discussion

6.1 Comparisons with other research

What was interesting was the evidence of religious identity in all classrooms with full emphasis on the Catholic faith in the room. Only one classroom had evidence of diverse religions with another displaying a project on diverse cultures within the classroom. Similarities can be found with Norberg 2000’s study in relation to anxiety on behalf of staff in highlighting diversity. Many of these fears were in relation to the fact that diversity and difference has typically been viewed as negative and linked to racism. What was evident among staff was the clear lack of preparation given to them for working with diverse populations and this inexperience was impacting on teaching provision. This would concur with arguments in Santo Rego and Nieto 2000’s research which questioned how staff with little experience of teaching to diverse ethnicities can meet the needs and provide an optimal level of teaching to these students.

One important element of Milner 2005’s study was the need for teachers to include cultural knowledge in their teaching and incorporate diversity into their lesson plans and teaching. However, staff in this study argued that the current curriculum is outdated and tokenistic and does not provide an opportunity for them to develop cultural knowledge. Accordingly, additional responsibility was placed on teaching staff to source additional materials to meet both diverse abilities and diverse nationalities within the classroom. Major challenges were found with time constraints and pressure placed on teachers to deliver a diverse range of subjects in an overloaded curriculum.

All teaching staff emphasised and stressed how important it was to have support and guidance from the Principal. Marx and Moss 2011 and Milner 2005’s studies both highlighted the importance of immersion programmes abroad during teacher training or for newly qualified teachers. This was clearly the case in this study with all staff expressing how ill-equipped and ill-prepared they were for teaching in such a diverse environment. It must be noted that all teaching staff interviewed were relatively recently qualified and had begun their teaching career during the millennium when major demographic change had already occurred in Ireland. It was interesting to note that one staff member had spent a period of time abroad in the United Kingdom teaching in a diverse learning environment. It was clear that this experience greatly placed this staff member at an advantage as he felt prepared and

experienced when working with a diverse student body.

A key argument among staff was the belief that in order for students to achieve academically and socially, close links must be in place with parents and their involvement was viewed as critical but seriously lacking in this school. What is interesting is that parents in this study cited links with the school as being extremely important, however, they argued that contact by way of text message and newsletter was sufficient. What was very clear was the positive climate that existed within the school and though it was a busy school, the atmosphere within the school was very open and welcoming.

6.2 Observations

What was immediately apparent when entering the classrooms was the major influence of religion and specifically Catholicism, on teaching. The 'sacred space' was clearly evident in each room and in 11 out of 12 rooms it contained objects and symbols solely from the Catholic faith. This appeared to be very influential on Irish students who clearly saw a link between cultural identity and religion. Many of the newcomer students were unable to locate evidence of their own cultural identity, however, interestingly there was a lack of importance attributed by them to having such symbols in the classroom. What was also interesting was that cultural identity was more important to Irish parents than newcomer parents. Similar to previous research, issues were found with classroom management in terms of noise levels and disruptions due to diverse learning needs. There were significant differences between the level of diversity among students who engaged in structured games and sports during recreation times and those who did not. Those not engaging in activities tended to be part of smaller groups and the mix was much less diverse, which was particularly obvious among female students.

6.3 Staff

What emerged very strongly from this research was the expectation that staff could provide an optimal level of education with little or no preparation at undergraduate level and a lack of State intervention in terms of supports given to the school. Staff argued that practical support and ongoing in-service training was required to enhance their teaching. What was also significant was the fact that any training at undergraduate level focused solely on inclusion of individuals with special educational needs in the mainstream system with

little or no emphasis on inclusion of students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Staff found it extremely difficult to implement the full curriculum as many newcomer parents did not allow their children to participate in all aspects of the curriculum. For example, some cultures did not allow their children to participate in the music curriculum, therefore, the onus was on the teacher to devise alternative arrangements during this teaching period. Many cultures disallowed girls and boys to sit together, again it was the teacher's responsibility to plan seating arrangements to ensure these wishes were upheld. It would appear that the school was required to acquiesce to many demands from newcomer parents while there was little effort on their part to assimilate into the ways of the school.

While staff reported that the current curriculum was outdated and tokenistic, it could be argued that it was implemented at the early stages of demographic change in Ireland, therefore, this lack of diversity can almost be explained on the basis of timing and to a degree on the lack of knowledge on diversity among curriculum planners. However, what emerges as unusual is that two extensive reviews were undertaken in 2003 and 2006 which focused on specific subjects on the curriculum and challenges and issues were found in relation to diversity and inclusion, however, to date, no revisions or updates have been put in place. While differentiation and paired learning were highlighted as essential, it was resources and resource teachers which emerged as critical to the implementation of intercultural education. Planning was critically important and was a shared process between mainstream staff and resource teachers. Language emerged as a specific challenge for all staff in this school and there was clear evidence of increased pressure on staff due to poor language ability among students.

Religion was a core challenge for staff due to the excess of time being spent on teaching Catholicism. This led to disruption for non-Catholic children who were expected to remain in the class during this time, but were non-participative. What emerged for staff were the challenges experienced in relation to arguments within the classroom among non-Catholic students who frequently challenged teachers in relation to the beliefs and teachings being taught which contradicted their religious beliefs. Some staff argued that teaching religion should not be the responsibility of the school and all staff agreed that a more general religious module would be more effective. It was evident that being a DEIS school resulted in significant additional challenges for staff due to social issues which impacted on learning for students. Staff were often dealing with students who came to school exhausted as they had not slept the

night before due to anti-social behaviour in their neighbourhood or children who were unable to complete homework as their parents could not afford to pay the electricity bill.

What was interesting were the strongly held beliefs among staff and Irish parents that parental attitudes in the home greatly influenced student behaviour. This was attributed to the fact that as students matured they became more aware of what was being said in the home and these opinions often transferred into the classroom, resulting in issues with socialisation among students. This school had clear policies and guidelines on bullying and staff were very clear on procedures for dealing with any incidents which arose in the course of their teaching. Extracurricular activities were deemed critical to development of social skills among children as the focus was on skill and ability with little attention on colour or nationality. Accordingly, it is of great concern that such activities may be cut due to the stipulations in the Croke Park Agreement.

6.4 Students

Photo ethnography proved to be innovative, useful and a very suitable method of data collection with students, in this setting. What was key was the ease with which the interviews flowed as students were facilitated to tell their story through use of the photographs. Some students were quite shy and very young, however, when they viewed their photographs displayed on large coloured card it served to break the ice and the divide between the researcher and the researched. Children became animated as photographs became their story of learning and ownership of the process rested with the students. Likes and dislikes in relation to school focused solely on subjects on the curriculum which could be considered the norm among students. With the exception of one student, photographs depicting culture demonstrated religious symbols.

What emerged as interesting was the lack of importance placed by newcomer students on learning about diversity due to the fact that there were now living in Ireland and part of Irish society. It was noteworthy that both Eastern European and African students identified themselves as being either Irish or part of Irish society. When discussing friendship groupings, students equated friendships with belonging and linked lack of friendship with loneliness. Photographs displayed by students demonstrated very clear diversity among friendship groupings, however, when discussing friends many students indicated that their closest friends were of their own nationality. What was interesting was when the male students spoke about friendships it

was in terms of activities that they played together while the female students focused on communication with their friends and simply 'hanging out' together.

6.5 Parents

Emphasis was placed by both newcomer and Irish parents on the importance of maintaining cultural identity, however, what emerged as different in this research was the importance of Irish identity among newcomer parents. There was great enthusiasm among newcomer parents of all things Irish and their hopes were that their children would complete third level education here, live and work and repay Ireland for the opportunities afforded to them. What emerged from this research was that newcomer parents stressed the importance of their children speaking and learning English. One parent stated that she insisted her child speaks only English in school, however, language of origin was the sole language spoken at home. There appeared to be little understanding among newcomer parents of the links between poor academic attainment and language spoken at home.

Identity emerged as an issue for newcomer parents who cited confusion among their children who believed they were Irish but were told they were not by Irish students. This caused concern among newcomer parents, however, customs and practices within the home in no way fostered Irish identity. Newcomer parents spoke about arguments and debate at home with respect to identity but did not take any responsibility for their role in this confusion. What was significant was that Irish Catholic parents expressed concern that one religion was being taught in such a diverse educational environment. Their argument was that often Irish children who were preparing for sacraments did not actively participate in religious practices outside school and rarely attended church. Newcomer parents did not have any issues with the teaching of Catholicism during class time, however, stated they would like more attention placed on religion and morality, generally.

What was clearly evident among parents was their level of knowledge in relation to friendship groupings among their children and the level of importance they placed on social skill development. Neither newcomer nor Irish parents had any issues with their children mixing together and newcomer parents were particularly happy that their children participated in Irish sports and became fully part of Irish society.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

7.1 Staff

Some key recommendations in relation to staff were that a task force be established to review religious education, that ongoing, practical in-service training be provided to staff on working in a multicultural, diverse environment, that a Sub-Committee be established to conduct a review of the primary school curriculum and that resource allocation be maintained in this school

7.2 Students

Some key recommendations in relation to students include the provision of social skills workshops, in particular, for students as they get older, that staff work with students to develop a 'cultural space' in the classroom and that funding be made available by the Department of Education and Skills through the DEIS initiative for the maintenance of extracurricular activities in the school.

7.3 Parents

Some key recommendations in relation to parents include workshops on inclusion be developed to educate parents on diversity and to encourage parental involvement in the educational lives of their children, that parents are made aware of the links between English language attainment and academic achievement and that newcomer families are encouraged and supported to become active members of Irish society.

7.4 Conclusion

Cultural inclusion has resulted in significant diversity in student profile within the Irish educational system and necessitated change on the part of teaching staff. In addition, significant challenges have been placed on teaching staff who are working with limited resources and with a curriculum which is already overloaded. It is hoped that this micro study has contributed to our current knowledge of cultural inclusion and provided a valuable insight into the issues and challenges in education today. Finally, it is hoped that this study will be used to inform future research and guide policy makers and schools in the provision of education in a dynamic, evolving and changing educational environment.

8. References

- [1] Fanning, B. (2007), *Immigration and social change in the Republic of Ireland*, UK: Manchester University Press
- [2] Department of Education and Skills website, Going to Primary School, (Retrieved 12 June 2011 from <http://www.education.ie/robots/view.jsp?pcategory=10856&language=EN&ecategory=41358&link=link001&doc=37553>)
- [3] Norberg, K. (2000), Intercultural education and teacher education in Sweden, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 16, 511-519, pp.513
- [4] McGorman, E. and Sugrue, C. (2007), *Intercultural Education: Primary Challenges in Dublin 15*, Dublin: Department of Education and Science
- [5] Santos Rego, M.A., Nieto, S. (2000), Multicultural/intercultural teacher education in two contexts: lessons from the United States and Spain, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 16, 413-427, pp. 414
- [6] Kurawa, G. (2010), Teaching diversity in a primary school: examining teachers classroom strategies for inclusion, *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 5, 1585-1591
- [7] Creswell, J.W. (2003), *Research Design Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approach (2nd ed)*, CA: SAGE Publications Inc.
- [8] St. P² Senior National School (nd), *Policies and Initiatives on Disadvantage*, Dublin: St. P Senior National School
- [9] St. P. Senior National School (nd) *Mission Statement*, Dublin: St. P. Senior National School, pp. 2
- [10] Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (nd), *Integration: A two-way process, Report to the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform by the Interdepartmental working group on the Integration of Refugees in Ireland*, Dublin, Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform
- [11] Central Statistics Office (2011) *Census of Population Preliminary Results*, Dublin: CSO (Retrieved 12/10/11 from <http://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/census/documents/Prelim%20complete.pdf>)
- [12] Milner, H.R. (2005) Stability and Change in US Prospective Teachers' beliefs and decisions about diversity and learning to teach, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 21, 767-786, pp.769-770

² Due to confidentiality, the name of the school has been disclosed to the Examining Body only.

[13] Ní Chonaill, B. (2009) *Perceptions of Migrants and their Impact on the Blanchardstown area: Local Views*, A report funded by the Irish Research Council in Humanities and Social Science, Dublin: IRCHSS

[14] Marx, H. and Moss, D.M. (2011) Please Mind the Culture Gap: Intercultural Development During a Teacher Education Study Abroad Program, *Journal of Teacher Education*, 62 (1), 35-47, pp. 35

[15] Department of Education and Science (2004) *A Brief Description of the Irish Education System*, Dublin: Communications Unit, Department of Education and Science

[16] Government of Ireland (1999) *Primary School Curriculum Introduction*, Dublin: The Stationery Office

[17] Government of Ireland (1998), *Education Act*, Dublin: The Stationery Office

[18] Government of Ireland (2000), *Equal Status Act*, Dublin: The Stationery Office

[19] Government of Ireland (2004), *Education for People with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act*, Dublin: The Stationery Office

[20] Griffin, T. (2007), Education for Persons with Special Education Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 and Disability Act 2005, *Circular 0050/2007*, Dublin: Department of Education and Science