

Diversity

Issues of diversity and inclusion have featured often on the agendas of NCCA Council meetings in the last year. Whether these have been issues to do with the increasing number of international students, the inclusion of students with special educational needs, or the diverse needs of disadvantaged students, the view that has emerged is the same. The challenges involved for primary and post-primary schools in serving a diverse student population and in being truly inclusive are many and may be unprecedented. The comments and quotes around these pages are testimony to this.

But the comments also raise the question of whether the increasing diversity of the school-going population is recognised, accepted and viewed by all as a positive development in education. Perhaps the challenge of responding to diversity, whether that diversity relates to language, ability, culture or social difference and expectations, is not being equally met across our schools.

Some schools seem to be embracing diversity, others are struggling with being inclusive places. Parents and guardians availing of choice in an increasingly marketised education system may, as often as not, be choosing to avoid diversity rather than embrace it. This may be particularly true where a school's approach to handling diversity is perceived to have a negative impact on 'my' child.

But do we know enough about what is happening in schools, and what is changing in schools, in relation to this rapidly changing dimension of the educational environment? The view emerging from discussions in the NCCA is that we don't, and that a research initiative is needed in this area. The research, which will commence shortly, will aim to capture the situation of schools with a diverse student population and their experience of being inclusive. The

They're no way ambitious that way... so it's mainly foundation; foundation in Irish, English and Maths, and then pass in all the other subjects.

Case study school teachers, ESRI research, explaining how the lower stream classes are allocated levels in the Junior Certificate examinations.

research will look at the dynamics associated with policy and practice related to diversity and inclusion in the school, with how this plays out for all students, rather than particular groups or categories of students.

For the purpose of the research, an inclusive school is being defined as one that operates on the basis of policies and practices that aim to cater effectively for the full and diverse range of learning needs of its students and that supports them fully in pursuing learning to the highest standards commensurate with their ability and potential.

An inclusive school welcomes, recognises, respects and celebrates diversity. A commitment to achieve equality of access, opportunity, participation and outcome for all its students is a foundational principle of an inclusive school. From the perspective of the learner, it is a school where the learner feels comfortable engaging with all aspects of schooling; where he/she has a strong sense that the school is working for them, in their interest; where she/he feels a genuine sense of belonging and well-being.

The first part of the research will be conducted during 2008. A final report on that phase will be completed early in 2009.

*We would be seen in the town in a certain way.... you know, that the LCA wouldn't be seen as **the** Leaving Certificate.*

Case study school principal, ESRI research, explaining why they are reluctant to offer LCA.

and inclusion



The research will involve working with a group of about 15 schools (primary and post-primary) that are identified as having a diverse student population. The subject of the research is the schools themselves. It will look at how the schools organise themselves, plan for and develop policy on diversity and inclusion. It will also gather information and examples of practice in the classroom – in teaching, learning and curriculum implementation - related to addressing diversity and inclusion.

For the NCCA, the research will contribute to ongoing curriculum and assessment review, specifically review in the areas of special educational needs, the Primary School Curriculum, the Junior Certificate School Programme and the Leaving Certificate Applied.

Most importantly, this research should also provide important insights, examples and experiences *from* schools for all those working *in* and *with* schools on how they can better serve a diverse student population and become more inclusive in this context.

We could design our Leaving Cert course to be better for weaker students...we discuss it every year and the school ...would have teachers...that would be totally opposed to seeing arts coming in, seeing woodwork coming in seeing.... building coming in because this is an academic school.. they feel that if we open the doors to those subjects that we will also get the kids coming in for those subjects.

Case Study School, teacher, ESRI research.

“The key to social cohesion is the use of a common language . . . resourcing English-language tuition to provide competencies in English as the common language of the State is imperative and absolutely essential,” Mr. Moriarty told the opening day of the IVEA conference in Killarney, Co Kerry.

Mr. Moriarty said achieving social cohesion was the way to avoid ethnic conflict in the future and said the winner/loser dynamic, “where one group’s gain is seen as a loss for another group”, had to be avoided.

Irish Times, September 27th 2007.

Conditions are so tight at St Mary’s National School.....that the special teacher for the non-Irish national population is now wedged into the cloakroom in a bid to find space.

The resource teacher, meanwhile, has no classroom at all and has to use the staff room while the general-purpose room, which should be used for PE and drama, is being used as a classroom to cater for increasing numbers at the school.

Almost 170 pupils attend the mixed national school which has its highest school population since it was built 50 years ago.

Irish Times, September 20th 2007.