

European teachers' concerns and experiences in responding to diversity in the classroom

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Diversity in European classrooms

Policy makers and educators across Europe see issues of diversity as being a core challenge of training for today's teachers:

- The continuous increase in the number of immigrants or refugees, and the social objective of the inclusion of all learners in the mainstream, including children with special needs, means that teachers/trainers are faced with socially, culturally and ethnically diverse pupils/trainees and challenges them to deal with more and more heterogeneous classes.

- (Progress Report of the EC Directorate General for Education and Culture, Working Group on 'Improving the Education of Teachers and Trainers' (November 2003, p.35) (http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/2010/doc/working-group-report_en.pdf)

- Handling or dealing with differences or diversity in the classroom forms one of the biggest challenges within European classrooms. ... the teacher has to deal with a larger diversity within his or her class and has to adapt or prepare the curriculum in such a way that the needs of all pupils, those with special educational needs (SEN), gifted pupils and their peers, are sufficiently met.

- (Meijer, 2003) (Meijer, J.W. (Ed.) (2003). *Summary Report: Inclusive Education and Classroom Practice (Para 3.2.2)*. European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (www.european-agency.org)

Responding to diversity

- A growing literature on how schools and teachers should respond to student diversity under the theme '**Differentiated teaching**'.
- Recent training packs produced by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (USA) and UNESCO (2004).
- Most widely used model proposed by Tomlinson (2003): teachers need to provide a match between the two elements in the teaching and learning process, namely between the diversity of students needs and strengths and the diversity of the curriculum.



Matching the curriculum to student characteristics

Diversity of **STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS:**

- Interests;
- Learning Styles;
- Readiness; and
- Affect

Diversity of **CURRICULUM:**

- Content;
- Process;
- Product; and
- Learning environment

Comenius 2.1 Project: DTM_p - Differentiated Teaching Module - *primary*



**Present study part
of 7-country
Comenius
project.**

**Aimed at using
Tomlinson's
model in an
internet based
training module:
for enabling
teachers in
primary schools
to respond to
pupil diversity.**

Research on differentiated teaching

Before developing the module, we wanted to get a feel for how teachers in actual classrooms

- perceived and responded to the challenge of reaching all students and
- what factors they considered important in the success or failure of their endeavours.

There are very few studies of actual teachers. One of the few empirical studies, using survey, interviews and observations in primary schools in Northern Ireland, found that:

- differentiation was used to respond to mixed abilities,
- grouping was a necessary strategy, and
- most differentiation took place within “an interactive teaching style to support individuals during group tasks”
- They also found that while many claimed to differentiate by outcome (i.e. product), teachers in fact gave the same tasks to students but usually the tasks led to different outcomes from different students (McGarvey et al., 1998,p.150).

Methodology: Research Questions

- **How do primary teachers understand and respond to diversity in European classrooms?**
- **What are the key challenges to and enabling factors for effective practice in this regard?**
- **What are the perceived training needs of teachers who seek to engage in responsive teaching?**



Design issues

- **Constructivist paradigm**
 - **Multiple, socially constructed realities**
 - **Interactive link between researcher and participants**
 - **Contextual factors retained (as opposed to decontextualised positivist methodology)**
- **Seeking to explore issues and generalise to (build) tentative theory rather than test hypotheses.**
- **Cyclic process of data collection and analysis**



Participants

Purposive choice of participants with the following characteristics:

- **Primary school teachers who have received full professional training as teachers.**
- **Have been in full time teaching in a primary school for at least one year.**
- **Teachers who are trying to respond to student diversity.**
- **Total of 35 teachers: (a) 5 from each country; (b) each from five different primary schools; (b) possibly covering the different ages of primary schooling.**

Actual Sample

Index No	Teaching exper.	Age-Group	Class composition	Teaching responsibility	Support system
M1	8 yrs	7-8 yrs (Yr 3)	Mixed ability and gender (12 m, 12 f)	Class teacher (+ others for PE, Music, Art, PSD)	Literacy Support
M2	10 yrs	7-8 yrs (Yr 3)	Mixed ability and gender (13 m, 12fm)	Class teacher (+ others for PE, Music, Art, PSD)	Literacy Support
M3	9 yrs	7-8 yrs (Yr 3)	Mixed ability and gender (11 m, 13 f)	Class teacher (+ others for PE, Music, Art, PSD)	Literacy support; Assistant for students with SEN
M4	6 yrs	5-6 yrs (Yr 1)	Mixed ability and gender (7 m, 9 f)	Class teacher (+ others for PE, Music, Art, PSD)	Literacy Support
M5	11 yrs	9-10 yrs (Yr 5)	Mixed ability; Boys only 29/28	Subject teacher (Eng & Hist) for two classes	Literacy Support; Assistant for student with SEN

Semi-structured Interview schedule

Aim:

To provide a description of teacher experiences relevant to responsive teaching in the different cultural contexts of each partner country, and specifically about:

Main questions:

- What kinds of diversity issues do teachers perceive in their classroom and school?
- What kinds of responses are these teachers using in their classrooms?
- What anecdotes of relevant good practice can they provide?
- What kinds of support do they find in their school for responding to the diversity of student needs?
- What kinds of barriers and hurdles do they face?
- What kinds of training needs and additional support personnel and materials would they like to have?
- What should courses consist of and what should go into a manual for training teachers to respond to student diversity?

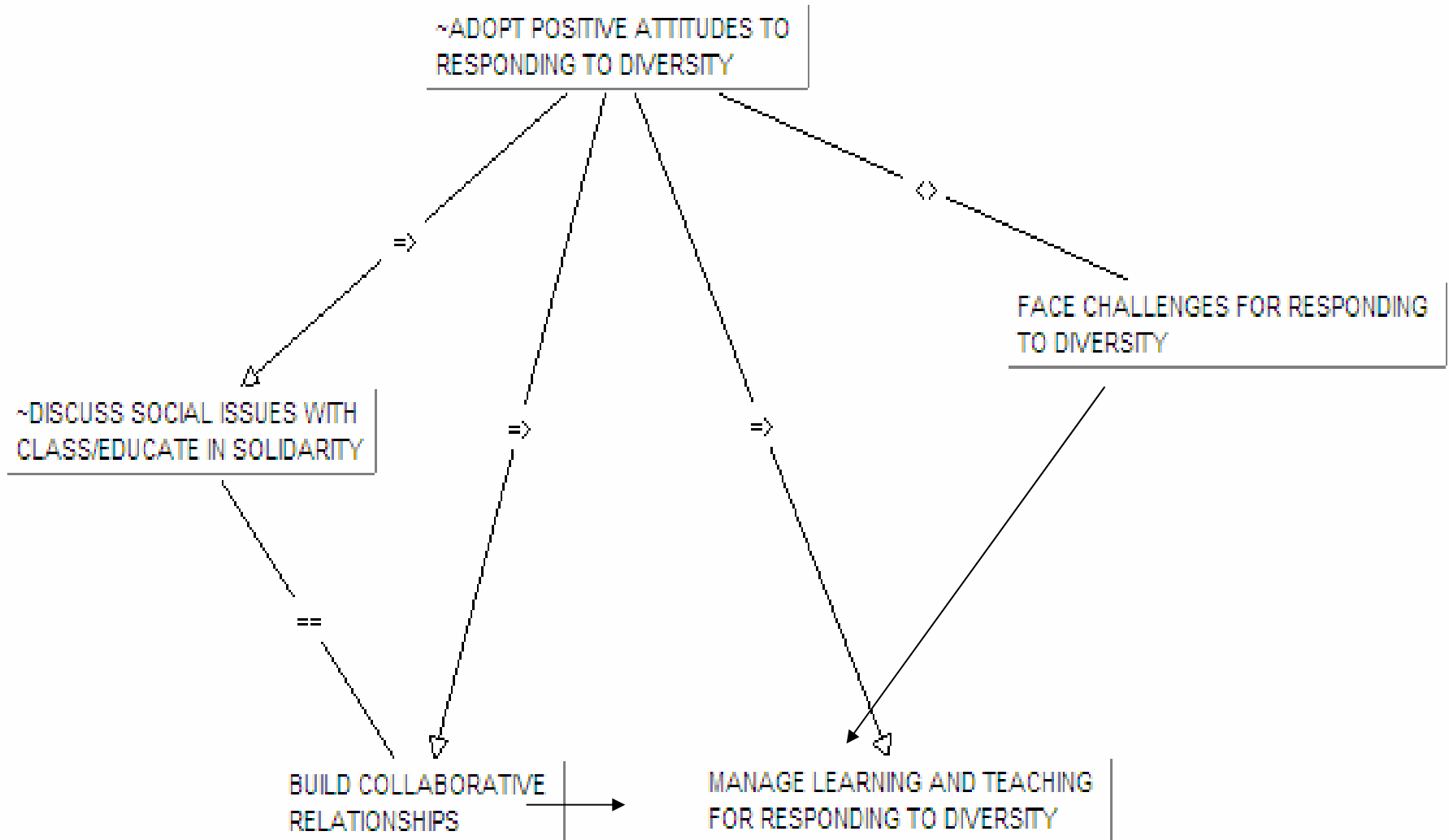
Data collection and analysis

- Interview piloted with one teacher from each country.
- Each partner carried out analysis of one interview.
- All analyses were brought together to develop a common coding framework.
- Common coding framework applied to all interviews.

This paper presents

- the common framework and
- the further analysis of the five Malta interviews

Results: Common framework: Five major issues for teachers





Common Coding Framework

1. **ADOPT A POSITIVE ATTITUDE TO RESPONDING TO DIVERSITY**

- **Recognise and respect various diversities**
- **Need opportunity for 'pedagogy conversations'**
- **Need school ethos for diversity**
- **Avoid labelling/devaluing thr' differentiation**



Common Coding Framework

2. **BUILD COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIPS**

- **Use teacher-pupil interaction/relationship**
- **Use social interaction among pupils**
- **Need parental involvement**
- **Need staff-staff collaboration**
- **Call for extra staff in class**

3. **DISCUSS SOCIAL ISSUES WITH CLASS/EDUCATE IN SOLIDARITY**

Common Coding Framework

4. USE SKILLS AND STRATEGIES FOR REACHING ALL STUDENTS

- Prepare/plan with the children
- Need to be creative, flexible
- Support independence of children: choice
- Use some activities that stimulate all students
- Use children's multiple intelligences
- Engage in multilevel activities/uses multilevel materials
- Provide support for learning
- Prefer formative assessment



Common Coding Framework

5. FACE CHALLENGES IN RESPONDING TO DIVERSITY

- **Grading system**
- **Deprived family background**
- **Conflicts among children**
- **Communication difficulties**
- **How to support children with difficult behaviour**
- **Time to manage preparation/ attention**
- **Lack of funds for resources**

Results 1: Adopt a positive attitude to diversity (1) – a metaphor



- *I mean, that's the beauty of our job: Every June I'm sad to see one group leave, but we have a new group in our class every year.*
- *That's why I said October is very difficult, because you have to get to know them, **you have to open these presents**, you know, and you don't know what you're gonna find, but it's our job to find it and to see what and how things are gonna work out, you know. (M2)*

Results 1: Adopt a positive attitude to diversity (2)– differentiate without devaluing

- *My library is graded, that is there are some books which are very easy and some that are very difficult. ...*

But I don't emphasise if a girl that can read a lot has taken a book that is easy, I don't tell her, "No, that is not good for you because it is too easy ..." I know this girl reads a lot anyway. But I don't pinpoint it, because of the others, so I do not tell the others, "Eh, so this is an easy book, so I will not take it because it will show me up as one who takes the easy books only"...

There's no need for me to tell him, "This is good for you," because he will realize that I am always giving him books that are easier than those read, for instance, by the one near him, and it makes - it hurts them. (M1)

Results 2: Build collaborative relationships (1)

Teacher – child: personal

- *For instance, I have that child who is crying a lot. I chose him for Sports Day today to give him a boost because I know he is passing through a bad patch. We had a little chat: I called him near me during the maths activity and we worked it together.(M1)*

Child-child: each other as resource

- *T: Children learn from each other, they also sometimes learn from each other's experiences, home backgrounds... some at times may feel superior and try to – but then, as I told you in religion and certain subjects, I try to raise certain types of values and certain types of issues more than others. (M1)*

Group work: mixed

I'm grouping the children according to their learning styles. In each group I have a technical child, a sequential child, another child who is precise and a confluent child.

This year I had a student teacher and she wanted to change the grouping system. She wanted to leave them in groups but according to the criterion of their favourite colour; the blue group, the pink group and the red group. And she had many problems. One of the groups consisted of all the leaders together, she had children with the same learning styles in one group. If for example they had to attach a picture, there were three technical children who wanted to attach the picture and they started fighting. (M3)

Results 2: Build collaborative relationships (2)

Teacher - parent

- *Sometimes you need to go beyond than just the child, sometimes you need to know the family background, which is quite difficult because I see so many boys; but it's important because even the parents come to you then; the communication, I find that the communication between the teacher and the parent, and the teacher and the child is crucial for this method to, to work. At the beginning of the year, I communicate with the parents and I tell them what differentiated teaching is, because some parents are, like used to em... trying to figure out what homework they are given; and sometimes they discover that work is given, different work is given to different boys and they start questioning but why, but why, but you know. So what I do is, I explain to the parents the method of differentiated teaching, and, till now, most of them they are very happy because they have seen results, em... because they see that what we're doing is for the good of the child.
(M5)*

Teacher - staff

- *T: If I need to talk to the Support Teacher, we have two and I have a good enough relationship with both so that, if I ask her, "Please can you" ... For instance I sent her the copybook and wrote her a note, "Can you do this exercise, please?" And she does it. This is the way...
(M1)*

Results 3: Discuss social issues with class/educate in solidarity

- I talk with them, I am talking with them more, even for instance when in this reading scheme, hm, there is a topic and we create a discussion on 'Bullying', for instance, and why this had a bad impact on those children; and get feedback from them, hm ...*

a story, for instance, yesterday, I did the story of the parable of the talents, hm, "What talents have we got? Why?" And I elicited from it that not everyone has the same talents, that some are good in sports, some are good, hm, and I mention different jobs, and everyone - I try creating a discussion whenever I can ... Because, I have learnt from experience, that children, when you talk with them and explain to them – we sometimes underestimate the children – when you talk with them and explain to them, they achieve much more and do what they do with a particularly greater earnestness. (M1)

Results 4: Use skills and strategies for reaching all students (1)

Get to know them

I really try to get to know the children as much as possible so that I can target ... even when I'm planning I have the boys in front of me, all the time, their names ... I can say yes, Jack can do this, but Tom can't do it.

.... I try to see what programs and what hobbies they have, I, as I try to instill these into my lessons, the children then respond automatically. (M5)

Provide support – emotional

T: You notice that some others are afraid, are always fearful, always fearful and so asking to check if what they are doing is right. ... Em ... So we give those most afraid courage; even his mates sort of, "No, why are you losing heart... You can do them" ... and I, praised the children a lot, I mean I praised them for every bit of effort they put in, and so they made progress. Certain fears they had at the beginning of the year have now obviously been ... And we are now used to each other, they are used to me, they know there's no ... so they feel free to ask questions, and fear has been reduced. And the more established their skills become in an area, the more they are happy to keep working on it ... (M4)

Build on children's experience

We recognize the importance of the context, that the language is taught in a context, the context that each child has; his or her own experiences... As we're saying, the children are still in their first stages of development. And we are to continue building on their home and other experiences. This is the secret of early education.

Results 4: Use skills and strategies for reaching all students (2)

Provide support - academic

I: What kind of adaptations do you make?

T: *It's a mixed ability class, so I have the very intelligent ones who will finish an activity within 5 or 10 minutes and you have those who will go on forever ... Em ... sometimes you need to bring some of the children closer to you. Sometimes, you need to explain after giving the class explanation. You know that two or three of the children would not have grasped all the listed details of the, of the task that you're expecting, so you bring them, at least I bring them closer and I, or I go to their desk, and explain 'Listen this is what you have to do'; and I break up the task into steps so that the children feel that 'Eh, this is all I have to do. Oh this I can manage', you know, and then, when they're done from that we'll go into the second part. Em ... sometimes you get other children to help them, other more able children em ... to help them. (M1)*

Use Multiple Modalities

I use drama a lot, in all the lessons, especially in religion, in Maltese, and even in, you know, when we do just moral lessons where there is a problem of behaviour, and we act it out to see what is the appropriate behaviour em... and I involve a lot those children who maybe weak in writing but are good at talking, so in that way they feel important, that they too are able to contribute to the others. (M4)

Use some activities that stimulate all

Yesterday I did a lesson on symmetry lesson. And I gave them the task of cutting up papers etc. And when the bell rang they went, 'UFF let's continue it, Miss. Let's continue cutting.' Eh, and even these children (slow learners) were cutting, because it was a simple lesson, a very simple lesson. ... Because they were cutting, and pasting, and colouring – it wasn't a maths lesson ... (all)the children were engaged in doing something practical ... (M1)

Results 5: Face challenges in responding to diversity

Communication

I: *Are there any children that you feel you have found it hard to engage?*

T: *Yes, I have for example one particular child, who's very bright, he's an A student, but who doesn't communicate. I have hardly heard his voice, even when he comes up to me to speak to me, I can hardly hear his voice. He seems to be a very sensitive child, very close. Yes and I find it very hard to relate to him.*

Behaviour

- *I have one who worries me a bit in his behaviour that is, but there were certain changes at home, and certain changes at school that have affected him and so I am working more with him, I work with the others so they understand his behaviour, why he is behaving that way at the moment... however he still is not abiding by the class rules even though we have rules and he wants to do the total opposite all the time, and we are working on this with him to get everyone because when you have a little problem... as soon as he has a little problem then he automatically seems to block himself from learning so we are working on the problem so that he can start learning at his own normal pace. (M4)*

Conclusion

- While skills in matching student characteristics to differentiated content, process and product are essential for reaching all students, the first priority of teacher training in responsive instruction should be aimed at enabling teachers to construct an appreciation of diversity, of holistic child development, and inclusive education.
- Training also needs to enable teachers to develop interpersonal skills for relating with students as well as for collaboration with other staff and parents.
- Training needs to enable teachers
 - To create a safe and inclusive climate;
 - To get to know their students and their culture;
 - To develop the ability to differentiate content at different levels, linked to a variety of interests and presented in a variety of modalities;
 - To use more of those activities and forms of classroom organisation that engage most students, and allow for differentiated access to learning;
 - To use assessment formatively, allowing a creative variety of performances as evidence of student learning.

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