

How can Intercultural Diversity be understood? The Lecturers' Response

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Abstract

Education set-ups across different age cohorts and countries often pride themselves on having students from various nations. The objective of this paper is to understand how, within a Maltese context, lecturers at sixth form level understand and consider intercultural diversity when implementing the curriculum. It also studies how lecturers' personal experiences with race and culture inform their thinking on a meta-reflective level. Previous research has shown the importance of the use of reflection in teacher education (Davis 2006) and the use of portfolios for learning and assessment (Chetcuti et al. 2006) but little research has been carried out on teachers' perspectives of teaching intercultural classes at a sixth form level. The study aims to fill in this lacuna in the literature by exploring what lecturers believe influences their ideas and practices of intercultural education in the classes they teach. There are clear implications of this study for policy, particularly showing that good will and having the best of intentions need to be augmented by a curriculum that is flexible enough to accommodate for students from different cultural groups if student learning is to be optimised across the board.

Keywords:

teaching pedagogy; race/culture; power and influence; student-centred or curriculum-centred teaching; inter/multiculturalism.



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Introduction

The mobility of both people and capital, global interconnectedness, edu-business, comparisons made by international organisations, technological and 21st century innovations and other similar pressures (Deppe et al. 2018) are impinging upon education worldwide to take account of what is required for learners to cope in a constantly changing multicultural and global reality (Fielding and Vidovich 2016; Yemini et al. 2014; Seguna 2019). Therefore, exploring lecturers' appreciation of intercultural diversity has become a necessity. It is unlikely that any country exists whose young people do not expect to have contact with people from different countries at some stage of their lives. Waldow (2018) believes that any school's programme which does not contain "some element of 'internationality' nowadays would arguably encounter questions about its value and legitimacy, at least in many Western democracies" (250). These authors' claims imply that the provision of educational programmes that promote understanding and intercultural sensitivity are called for across the educational trajectory: schools, Sixth Forms⁷, and institutions of further and higher education. It is in these settings that children and young people are most likely to come across people from cultural and ethnic backgrounds that are different to their own.

Going back in time, as Hobsbawm (2005) claims, the world in the 1780s was "at once much smaller and much larger than ours" (7). Inhabitants were knowledgeable of the geographic area they lived in, and most people "lived and died in the country, and often in the parish, of their birth. As late as 1861 more than 9 out of 10 in 70 of the 90 French departments lived in the department of their birth" (Hobsbawm 2005: 10). Countries were effectively more isolated from each other, there was less ease of access to travel from place to place, and thereby less possibility for people from different parts of the world to interact with one another. Fairly recent political events, such as the fall of the Iron Curtain, and ongoing happenings, such as the expansion of the European Union (EU), decreased costs of air-fares as a result of improved technology, and the proliferation of the use of the internet, has meant that young people are likely to encounter far more peers from different

⁷ In Malta, a Sixth Form is an educational institution which educates students to achieve their Intermediate and Advanced examinations which may lead them to university.

cultural backgrounds than they would have at the times that Hobsbawm is referring to.

Many of today's classrooms and lecture-rooms provide a learning environment to students of different faiths, cultural outlooks, and customs and practices. This implies that lecturers need to be adequately responsive to multiple perspectives if they are to engage with students and deliver lessons that students find relevant, interesting, up-to-date and informative. Spiteri (2020) points out nonetheless that "student satisfaction is quite complex to gauge. This is because it engages students in subjectively evaluating their wellbeing and this can change fairly easily" (53). For this reason, it is not only foreign students but also local students who may have to adapt to changes in society. Within the Maltese context, the recent institution of same-sex marriage and adoption rights and the legal facility for married couples to divorce are likely to have been almost unthinkable a decade ago. These changes carry the implication that teachers need to also remain abreast of the evolving social and cultural context they and their students are living in.

Migration in Malta is not a new concept. Malta's heterogeneous population, which was once believed to be homogeneous (Frendo 2005), is a vivid example of internationalisation and can be traced back to the Knights of St John, an international community. Outbound and inbound migration have always been evident. Apart from people who come to Malta to find work, including EU nationals who are exercising their right to freedom of movement, Malta has also received migrants, mainly from sub-Saharan Africa, who have asked the Maltese government to grant them asylum or offer them some form of national or international protection. "The Maltese governments have also created initiatives to attract international people to invest in Malta. The Malta Individual Investor Programme, the Malta Retirement Programme, the Malta Global Residence Programme, as well as work permits for foreigners, are all measures which are in place to attract migrants" (Seguna 2019: 135).

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Research Question

This study answers the question "How do lecturers at a Sixth Form in Malta adapt their lessons to be responsive to the different cultural backgrounds of their students?" The question thereby explores the influences of intercultural diversity on lecturers and of the multicultural factors that lecturers see as influencing the pedagogy they adopt. By promoting an understanding of classroom dynamics, the study provides information that could be used to bring about potential changes in educational programmes in Malta.

Literature Review

Intercultural diversity in educational settings needs to be understood with the context of policies of inclusion or exclusion since they can impact on how people engage with social difference (Letki 2008). Speaking in a general way, Atkinson (1998) points out that "people are excluded not just because they are currently without a job or income, but because they have little prospects for the future" (14). Atkinson highlights that when people are viewed as 'different', they are liable to be excluded. Exclusion comes about particularly when people are classified as 'the other' and thereby not as 'one of us.' Even a superficial overview of the literature would show that within schools, and equally as emphatically within Sixth Form contexts, educators play an essential role in creating a school climate which is welcoming, in which students feel safe, and in which they do not feel that they are strangers or that they are being turned away or rejected. Intercultural education promotes safety since central to it is "naming and actively challenging racism and other forms of injustice, not simply recognising and celebrating differences and reducing prejudice" (Berlak and Moyenda 2001: 92). Sharma and Portelli (2014) point out that, when prejudices prevail at schools, deficit thinking results. The authors explain that when deficit thinking is adopted,

differences from the 'norm' are immediately seen as being deprived, negative, and disadvantaged. It never questions the legitimacy of what is deemed to be normal nor does it consider that differences may actually go beyond expected norms. It discourages teachers and

administrators from recognizing the positive values of certain abilities, dispositions, and actions. (255)

This clearly shows that in order to promote social equity at Sixth Form, and to create a truly inclusive atmosphere, students' individuality needs to be respected. This is because even though traditional assimilationist theories are based on an assumption that young people prefer inclusion to exclusion (Raum et al. 2009), there are times when children and young people may opt out of wanting to know something, at any point throughout their years at school, and thereby either not make a whole-hearted effort to join in during lessons or not participate at all (Spiteri 2008).

An important aspect of intercultural education is offering viable alternatives to certain lessons or perhaps to certain practices that some students may find objectionable. Intercultural diversity calls for personalised teaching which impedes a 'blame the victim' or 'deficit' approach' where some students are seen to lack the skills in areas where other students are competent (van Dijk 1992; Portelli 1996). As Sultana (1997) explains, teachers occupy political roles since "their actions and non-actions will work in the interests – or against the interests – of the young people they are responsible for" (410). To further compound matters, there are "multiple and conflicting interpretations, meanings and implications" (Goldberg 1994: 7) of what constitutes effective multicultural education, leading to an anomalous situation characterised by "popular but regressive practices wrongly framed as multicultural education" (Gorksi 2006: 164).

The way cultural attributes are perceived are social constructions. Even though there are many definitions of culture, the concept of culture has been presented as inclusive of language, religious beliefs, collective attitudes, and habits. The way in which these aspects are holistically perceived is also subjectively influenced. For social constructionists, the meaning is co-constructed by people in social interaction with one another. This meaning is embedded in socio-cultural processes that take place in a specific period or space, and which lead to practices which were once seen as normal to die out. One such example is the wearing of the *ghonnella* by

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Maltese women, a head-dress that was only worn in Malta and Gozo until the 1970s, and which then fell into disuse. Historically, many different cultures have come about since differences between groups of people became more pronounced. Sometimes, they have led to the creation of hybrid cultures that may bear some semblance to other cultures and yet have distinctive characteristics of their own (Bhabha 1994). Cultures, however, are extremely fluid, hard to pin down, and many of the defining characteristics are like a slippery eel: as soon as one tries to define an aspect of the culture, a myriad of exceptions to that aspect are likely to be found. Within a classroom setting, it is important for teachers to not only understand certain cultural nuances, but also see them in the light of students' volition to adapt in order to feel part of the school. It is possible that some students may feel inhibited since everything seems 'new,' whereas others may develop an extra drive to succeed since, being in a different country, they expect things to be more difficult (Lauglo 2000). It is also possible that students who initially felt inhibited develop the self-confidence and resilience in order to succeed in school (Cefai and Spiteri 2017), but often doing so involves the support of teachers, peers, and a whole-school approach of holistic acceptance.

Devine (2011) explains that intercultural education needs to be equated to a philosophy that influences the way schools operate, rather than something which individual teachers may casually insert into their lessons. It is only in this way that students would be enabled to acquire a deeper knowledge of culture and understand how they can use this knowledge to relate in a more meaningful way with their peers, irrespective of the cultural, racial, or ethnic similarities and differences that they may have. Likewise, Devine does not look upon the organisation of intercultural days positively, believing that this could lead to negative stereotyping. Bryan (2009) believes that intercultural days "also have the effect of entrenching the boundaries between nationals and 'non-national' or 'international students'" (306). Rather, Chan (2016) believes that professional growth, critical thinking, reflection and renewal must be integrated into the approaches that schools adopt in order to foster harmony among students. Complementary to Chan's thinking, Spiteri (2013) suggests that intercultural education involves enabling students to adopt what Bennett

(1986, 1993) calls an 'ethno-relative outlook.' Consequently, students need to understand that different cultures can co-exist without losing touch with one's own or only taking on aspects from international students. Kramsch (1993) further suggests that international students need to be enabled to position themselves in an independent 'third place' from where they can recognise and reflect on their home culture and their target culture, as in this way they can obtain critical reflective knowledge about how they can adjust more effectively to their 'new' social context. In practice, this may be, for example, designing learning experiences where students can be more exposed to different cultural values in written texts or referring to the experiences of renowned people from other cultural backgrounds in order to make the lesson more engaging.

Research Methodology

The study uses a case-study approach and is focused on an independent Sixth Form in Malta. Seven lecturers were interviewed using an unstructured interview schedule and this small number of participants allowed the authors to have direct interactions with and feedback from the participants (Flyvbjerg 2016). Flyvbjerg explains that "context-dependent knowledge and experience are at the very heart of expert activity. Such knowledge and expertise also lie at the center of the case study as a research and teaching method; or to put it more generally, still: as a method of learning" (5). The purpose of this qualitative research was to explore the perspective of the participants in this study, thus allowing their voices to be heard and as Flyvbjerg says – to thereby 'learn' from them. This was in an effort to understand the way in which intercultural diversity is perceived and approached by lecturers at Sixth Form level, and how their personal experiences with race and culture inform their thinking on a meta-reflective level.

A qualitative approach was selected because it allowed the researchers to gain an understanding of lecturers' perspectives of the approaches they adopted when teaching intercultural classes. Both authors interviewed the participants together and inquired about how lecturers took an active role in encouraging cross-cultural communication in their classrooms and how they manifested intercultural sensitivity in their

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teaching/lecturing. The participants were a purposeful sample and were selected in virtue of their teaching classes with both home students and international learners. It was assumed that the sample would help the researchers to build data-rich cases that would enable them to come with insightful findings related to their research goals. Each interview was audiotaped with the participant's permission, and then transcribed by one of the interviewers. The other interviewer checked the transcripts for accuracy to ensure the study's validity.

A constructivist design was used in this research in order to allow the participants to "examine how their own understandings, skills, values, and present knowledge both frame and constrain their actions" (Creswell 2002: 610). Since the study was focused on how lecturers adapted their lectures in order to be responsive to the needs of students in intercultural classes, all interviews were purposely carried out at the Sixth Form as it was believed that in this way, the participants would find it easier to reflect on the approaches to lecturing that they employed. The constructivist paradigm holds that people develop subjective meanings of their experiences, meanings that are directed toward certain objects or things, and thereby the more significant they are to them, the more likely they are to be seen as meaningful (Creswell 2012, 2013).

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the school's administration and the Sixth Form lecturers all volunteered to be interviewed. The participants were sent an email wherein they were invited to participate in the study and were informed about its goals. They were notified that their participation was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time if they so desired, without the need to offer a reason for so doing. No identifying information was recorded during the sessions to ensure that confidentiality was safeguarded. Additionally, all research-related documents were stored on a password-protected computer, which only the researchers had shared access to. The participants were assigned codes in order to ensure their anonymity.

The study was constructed around an assumption that there could be multiple perspectives about the way lecturing to intercultural classes is approached. The researchers

attempted to explore the lecturers' subjective experiences and attitudes in order to empirically explore their perceptions and lived experiences of their students when lecturing.

Findings

All interviewees were asked what they understood by the term *intercultural diversity*. Similar responses were given, such as catering for "students from diverse countries ... that somehow they bring their traditions, their religions, their language, their language barriers, their problems, the way they've been doing things, their education systems which sometimes are totally different from ours" (Interviewee (INT)1). Other definitions of intercultural diversity were: "understanding the differences, understanding that there are differences in culture, acknowledging them and making allowances for different attitudes, and beliefs, behaviour" (INT4) as well as "tolerating, being open to, and being accessible to different cultures or nationalities" (INT3).

All the lecturers expressed the view that the world within their lecture rooms had changed over the fairly recent past. They said that they saw a shift from a mainly Maltese environment to a very international one, at times with more international learners than Maltese! They did not experience this as intimidating or overwhelming; but instead as one that helped them to cherish the diverse classes they now lectured to. Having a diverse class allowed them to show the learners that more than one perspective may exist; and that both could be acceptable without experiencing the need to create conflict between them. Intercultural diversity, therefore, denotes differences between the different cultures of different nationalities and that one's standpoint in "subjects like Maltese history, which has been almost exclusively written from a Western view-point" should not be the 'Maltese' against the 'others' or vice versa (INT6). This finding ties in with Sadker and Zittleman's (2016) perspective within American classrooms which often focus only on a Western worldview, making certain groups such as African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans and Native Americans, or events invisible.

Having a diverse classroom also means that lecturers

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and teachers need to understand the struggles which the students bring to the classroom, such as language difficulties or understanding aspects through one's religious or cultural grid. These aspects need to be recognised, understood, appreciated and taken into consideration so that they are catered for in one's planning and delivery. One also needs to be aware that different educational systems vary in their approach and strategies used and therefore, when teaching international students, lecturers need to familiarise themselves with the differences. Mathematics uses a universal language. However, according to one interviewee, there is a difference in the way some numbers are written in figures as well as the format used "the Italians generally write in boxes, the Chinese write using columns, there are so many differences in the way people do things" (INT2).

One important finding, which most lecturers associated as a pressure that they experience as lecturers, is the vastness and, at times, the open-ended curriculum which they need to ensure is covered over their two-year programme. This creates undue pressure for them to give students as much information as possible, since failure to do so might have an effect on the students' examination passes.

The curriculum might also act as a barrier if one only teaches it as facts or knowledge that needs to be passed on to the students. Having syllabi with a Maltese cultural grid, as would be the case with subjects like geography or Maltese history, may create an issue for international students since the content may be inaccessible to them and they might not be knowledgeable of the Maltese territory or terrain, leading them to have difficulty in understanding the content and context. Likewise, when textbooks are used, which in Malta are mainly British, or when Catholic undertones are referred to, students might be incapable of reading between the lines or of understanding or visualising what is being learnt since they are distanced from the realities that the authors of these books take for granted. When teaching subjects such as English Literature the "the countryside is English, the weather is English, the wit is English, the irony is English" (INT 5). These aspects are not easily understood, since they might not be a context the students are familiar with, and therefore the

lecturer needs to be aware of this essential criterion. Often the manner in which ideas that some students may see as alien to them are succinctly introduced to the curriculum. Lippy (2016) explains that curriculum materials might reflect the beliefs and practices of mainline Protestant denominations such as Christian holidays thereby assigning less importance to other religious denominations. It is therefore the teacher who needs to be aware of these differences and ensure that other cultures and denominations are taken into consideration.

Saying this, subjects such as literature, geography, and biology are also universal and global since they touch upon topics which are applicable to all cultures. Literature texts have not been written in a vacuum but in a context and although the authors, such as Shakespeare, might not be contemporary, the texts focus upon universal topics such as jealousy, murder, anger and love, and it is likely this that gives his works their appeal. Similarly, the topics taught in geography are versatile and the lecturer, very naturally, touches upon different countries and cultures when focusing on the different aspects taught. The students' nationalities could also be considered an asset, in subjects such as geography and history, since the different backgrounds and perspectives may be brought into the lecture and discussed.

Assessment, especially in subjects which are nationally bound, was seen as giving rise to intercultural barriers. Different cultures have different viewpoints and therefore, when assessment and examination questions are being prepared, the interviewees observed that they need to be careful how questions are formulated and to avoid asking questions or situations which are culturally sensitive (INT4). It is thereby important for lecturers to be meta-reflective, or as one of the interviewees put it "self-questioning."

Although lecturers are not able to change the syllabi, one's teaching methods can be easily adapted to suit the different cultures within one's classroom. Having students of different nationalities often calls on lecturers to listen more and work at a slower pace in class to aim to elicit optimum student understanding. This, in turn, also means that lecturers need to draw on student voice and student engagement in their

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lectures. So as to draw on the cultural composition of their students in their classes, one of the interviewees explained that "we should be able to use their varied cultural backgrounds to enhance essay sharing, pooling ideas, trying to see each other's perspectives" (INT6).

All the lecturers interviewed mentioned the importance of offering support to the international learners, both in their induction and to help their integration. They mentioned that several common activities, such as sports fests, that are open to participation from all the students, are important for students to feel welcomed. They also mentioned that the Sixth Form organises icebreaking and bonding activities, even before the scholastic year commences, and throughout the year participation in exchanges and Euroskola trips are encouraged. They also pointed out that students with a poor level of spoken or written English are offered English as a Foreign Language support for as long as they require it. Since some students are in Malta unaccompanied, they are also offered help with basic daily exigencies, as well as the filling in of forms and applications. They said that students appreciate that the Sixth Form also acts as an intermediary for issues such as VISA applications, accommodation difficulties or communication with host families.

Limitations to the Study

Although ample data was collected through the interviews that were carried out, this study did involve a small number of participants who opted to be involved in the study and to be interviewed. The study was also carried out within an institution which forms part of one of the three sectors in Malta. This means that the teachers' ideas cannot be generalised to the whole of the population within educational institutions such as the College where the study took place, other Sixth Forms, or to any other similar educational settings.

This study is also time-bound, having been carried out within a chosen timeframe, namely towards the end of the scholastic year. It is therefore possible that had the study been carried out at another period within the scholastic year such as the beginning, the lecturers' perceptions might have been

different. The authors also utilized semi-structured interviews. Had they been structured differently or had focus groups or other methods of interviewing been adopted, less, more, or different data could have been gathered.

Recommendations

This case study has been carried out in a local independent Sixth Form and sheds light on how lecturers understand intercultural diversity and how their personal experiences with race and culture inform their thinking on a meta-reflective level. Both authors of this paper are educators with extensive teaching and lecturing experience in Malta and abroad and have developed a keen interest in the way schools operate. The authors are therefore conscious that while lecturers may aspire to adopt student-centred pedagogies, they may feel constrained to use curriculum-centred pedagogies to ensure that their syllabi are covered and consequently to enable their students to pass their exams. They are also conscious of the various challenges that lecturers face in order to adopt student-centred pedagogies.

The interviewees claim that, as experienced lecturers, they are better able to understand the needs of the different cultures and are more knowledgeable of the syllabus and its requirements in virtue of their many years of teaching. They explained that being a lecturer in an intercultural society also makes it essential for one to read up and be au courant with the latest knowledge and developments within one's field, as well as be more aware of other educational systems so as to include them or adapt accordingly.

It clearly emerges from this study that when planning and delivering one's lectures, therefore, it is essential that different perspectives are brought into the classroom. Especially with nationally based curricula, it is essential that examples and sources from different countries are used. This is so that the learning is not just Eurocentric or nation-centric but is as diverse and inclusive as possible, making it accessible to all students.

The study shows that culture is constituted of interconnected

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values and behaviours. These are picked up and internalised by children and young people during their socialisation which then manifest in the form of specific behaviours and expectations on society (Becirovic and Brdarevic–Celijo 2018), and thereby call on lecturers to be clear in their communications so that students may become more conscious of how to interact with others in appropriate ways. This study has focused upon how students are provided with opportunities to develop intercultural sensitivity with peers. It recommends that they do away with deficit thinking that is associated with intercultural prejudices. Rather, it calls on lecturers to engage them in actively minimising the development of stereotypes and ethnocentrism (Olson 1982: 25) by bringing out into the open and discussing their cultural differences whenever possible. The study has also brought to the fore the importance of lecturers becoming “sensitive to the changing nature of the ethnic and racial makeup of their students and their students’ parents” (McGee Banks 2016: 280). Rather than adopting a Maltese–centric or Euro–centric outlook, it can be recommended that by being on the lookout for how their students feel and look, and by using ideas and resources from different countries, all students of different nationalities are thereby included. By finding the common denominator between cultures, lecturers are better able to bridge the gaps and reach the students within their classrooms.

This study has shown that by creating an internationalised environment, attitudes and values, such as international understanding, tolerance, acceptance, respect, and cooperation are better transmitted. As ascertained by de Wit et al. (2015), “the earlier children are embedded in an intercultural and international environment, in their private life and at school, the more likely they are to continue to be interculturally and internationally stimulated and active” (285). Providing an intercultural and international outlook, therefore, helps all educational institutions, irrespective of the students’ age, to become adept within the global world of the 21st century. By recognising the importance of tapping into the international, educational institutions such as Sixth Forms, “distinguish themselves from the rest ... [since] distinction can be equated to schools that promote the international, thereby having an international mindset” (Seguna 2019: 357).

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