Cultural Diversity in the Post-Primary

Art History Curriculum

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Motivation

This review sets out to investigate if the current Art History and Appreciation specification taught in post primary senior cycle in the ROI is responding and relevant to learners from culturally diverse backgrounds.

For the purpose of this study we will use the term cultural diversity and people from culturally diverse backgrounds to refer to all ethnic groups except White Irish & British groups and include White minorities, such as Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller groups.

In order to define the context of this small scale study we will examine the current Leaving Certificate Art History and Appreciation curriculum in the Republic of Ireland in particular, which for the first time since its introduction in 1971 will see a revised curriculum introduced in September 2021. This research will briefly look at its developments and critique how it addresses cultural diversity, if indeed it does at all. The Leaving Certificate (LC) is the state examination at the end of a two year senior cycle (SC) at post-primary schools in the Republic of Ireland (typically 16-18 year olds).

This area of interest emerged through my role as a student art teacher while on placement during my first year of the Professional Masters of Education(PME) at the National College of Art and Design(NCAD) in Dublin, Ireland. The PME programme leads to a professional qualification to teach Art and Design at second level. School placement is a period of time where student teachers work alongside a qualified

teacher in a school where they develop the knowledge, teaching skills and attitudes needed for effective teaching and practice those skills.

My school placement took place in a diverse co-educational and multi-denomination-al school with students attending the school speaking more than 50 languages. In my 5th year art class, more than half the students came from a culturally diverse background. I became aware during this time that the senior cycle Visual Art History and Appreciation curriculum did not cater for cultural diversity, it is 'eurocentric, male dominated and traditional and does not reflect the diversity of contemporary Irish classrooms or indeed contemporary culture (ATAI 2016).' (Jordan, D., O'Donoghue, H., 2018, p.576)

Introduction

This literature review will look at a selection of publications including articles by Parker-Jenkins & Masterson, Tormey, O'Kelly and guidelines and reports from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and newspaper articles about education and diversity in Ireland.

This review will look at how diverse representation is of vital importance to young people from culturally diverse backgrounds in Ireland today through the curriculum they engage with in school and look at if and how Intercultural Education is embedded in the Art History and Appreciation element of the Art course at Senior Cycle. According to the Intercultural Strategy guidelines published by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2006) 'Intercultural Education respects, celebrates,

and recognises the normality of diversity in all aspects of human life, promotes equality and human rights, challenges unfair discrimination, and provides the values upon which equality is built'.

The review will look at critical visual literacy which (Newfield, D., 2011, p.82) describes as 'education that enhances understanding of the role and function of images in representation and communication, especially in the media' (Newfield, D., 2011, p. 82). Young people are inundated with media content and visuals, and educators 'need to support them to develop the capacity to decode and critically analyse text and non-text base cues and images alike' (King, F., Murphy, T., 2017).

The values on which the senior cycle is based include; human dignity and respect, equality and inclusion, justice and fairness, freedom and democracy (NCCA, 2018, p. 4). With this in mind the review will look at how educators are being guided towards creating an intercultural classroom through the guidelines provided by the NCCA (2006) for the senior cycle (SC) Visual Art curriculum at post-primary level in the Republic of Ireland.

A brief history of the Visual Art curriculum in the Republic of Ireland

The LC art curriculum was introduced in Ireland in 1968, art history and appreciation was added to it in 1972. (Jordan, D., O'Donoghue, H., 2018, p.576). The art curriculum encompasses the exploration of a number of art and craft disciplines and a section on History and Appreciation of Art. The areas of examination as part of the Leaving Certificate (LC) are Art in Ireland, European Art and General Appreciation. The LC

exam is designed to 'test the general knowledge of historical development and visual appreciation'(NCCA, *Leaving Certificate Syllabus - Arts*). The History and Appreciation of Art curriculum has remained unchanged since its introduction in 1972. A campaign by the Art Teachers Association of Ireland, was launched in 2016 in order to have the curriculum changed.

> The *State of the Art* campaign called for all of the parties – the Department of Education and Skills (DES), National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and State Examination Commission (SEC) – to work together with art teachers, parent and student groups and relevant stakeholders in culture and industry to design and implement a new LC curriculum, not simply assessment reform. (Jordan, D., O'Donoghue, H., 2018, p.577)

Reform is coming and the 'Art' curriculum that was published by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in 2019 outlines the new 'Visual Studies' which will take the place of the 'History and Appreciation of Art' section of the Leaving Certificate. The new curriculum was due to be implemented in September 2020 but due to the global pandemic of Covid-19 the introduction has been delayed until 2021. This new senior cycle Visual Studies curriculum (NCCA, 2019), states that;

> The vision of senior cycle sees the learner at the centre of the educational experience. That experience will enable learners to be resourceful, to be confident, to participate actively in society, to build an interest in learning, and to develop an ability to learn throughout their lives. (NCCA, 2019, p.3)

With this in mind, we might ask does the newly approved Art curriculum provide for the culturally diverse learner that we see within our classrooms in Ireland today? In an article 'No longer 'Catholic, White and Gaelic': schools in Ireland coming to terms with cultural diversity'(Parker-Jenkins, M., Masterson M., 2013) published in the

Irish Educational Studies journal, they talk about 'Curriculum' being defined as the transmission of culture, 'but whose culture is being transmitted and where is there scope for having a balanced offering, which includes the history and religion of others, and which celebrates the achievement of diverse cultures?'. Parker-Jenkins and Masterson argue that 'Within Ireland, the approach to cultural diversity in professional practice has predominantly been left to the discretion of the individual teacher who may or may not have had training on diversity matters, and may vary in their level of personal commitment'. If the policies for Intercultural Education (2006) are available, which they are, why are they not integrated into the Art curriculum more thoroughly and with purpose. There is no reference made to Intercultural Education in the draft specification for Visual Art which is due to launch next year.

Cultural Identity - Why is diverse representation within the Visual Art curriculum important for post-primary learners to see?

In the *The National Children's Strategy: Our Children – Their Lives* (Department of Health and Children, 2000) it outlines the key objective that 'children will be educated and supported to value social and cultural diversity so that all children including Travellers and other marginalised groups achieve their full potential'.

The Intercultural Education in Post-Primary Schools: Guidelines for Schools (NCCA, 2006) revealed

> Recent studies have found that some school children associate black people
> with images of poverty, warfare and helplessness with which they have be-
> come familiar from pictures and stories from Africa which are commonly used
> in Ireland. While such attitudes may express themselves through ideas of char-

ity and aid, they can be understood as racist attitudes, if they are based on a sense that African cultures are inferior to Western cultures.

These negative associations need to be addressed in our education system as a whole, and it is of vital importance to show people of culturally diverse backgrounds in creative roles in the art classroom if we as art educators are to counteract the negative stereotypes that can be associated with, in this example, black people in the media.

The documentary 'THIS LAND' is a short film about Ireland's relationship with race, identity and immigration. Journalist Dean Van Nguyen whose father is a Vietnamese immigrant to Ireland said about his memory of times growing up in Ireland, 'You didn't see people who look like my family on tv, but you could see them in these kung fu movies….. It's important I think to make sure kids grow up seeing a diverse spectrum of people who look like them and what they can achieve.' (This Land, 2020 Documentary). This film highlights the importance of seeing cultural diversity presented to young people in Ireland today.

> In most cases, the curriculum in the nation's schools and universities is largely Western in its concepts, paradigms, and content. For the child with non-Western parents, the impact of a Western curriculum on that student's self-concept, sense of pride, and cultural knowledge can be adverse. For Western students, the problem according to Banks (1977), is that individuals who know the world only from their own cultural and ethnic perspectives are denied important parts of the human experience and are culturally and ethnically encapsulated. (Dilger, S.C., 1994, p.50)

As educators and educational institutions we need to address the unconscious biases within our society and which inevitably seep into the curriculum and its delivery. In recent years educational institutions have started to address these biases and how they

effect students and staff through workshops and training, TU Dublin provide a '2 hour training workshop to create an understanding of how unconscious bias can influence our interactions and decision making with implications for equality of access and inclusion' (TU Dublin, 2019).

> Unconscious bias refers to a bias that we are unaware of, and which happens outside of our control. It is a bias that happens automatically and is triggered by our brain making quick judgments and assessments of people and situations, influenced by our background, cultural environment and personal experiences. (Equality Challenge Unit, 2013)

With the vast majority of teachers in Ireland being 'white, female and middle class'(O'Brien, 2018), it is of great importance for educators to actively engage with Intercultural Education, embrace diversity and be aware of our own biases. Athlone Education Centre were due to run a course in April this year which was postponed. The course proposed was directed at post-primary teachers and aimed to investigate 'personal unconscious biases and the biases of your students' and was to focus on 'strategies to minimize negative biases around the school and promote inclusivity and diversity in the classroom' (Athlone Education Support Centre, 2020). Though the course was only 1.5 hours long, it's evident that the need for such courses is there.

Critical Visual Literacy and Representation

In her TED talk 'The danger of the single story'(2009), Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie, recalls a story from her childhood where she would read British and American books, then at the age of seven when she started writing her own stories, she 'wrote exactly the kinds of stories I was reading: All my characters were white

and blue-eyed, they played in the snow, they ate apples, and they talked a lot about the weather, how lovely it was that the sun had come out' (2009). She notes

> how impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story, particularly as children. Because all I had read were books in which characters were foreign, I had become convinced that books by their very nature had to have foreigners in them and had to be about things with which I could not personally identify. (Chimamanda, 2009)

Chimamanda goes on to explain how this perspective changed when she discovered African books. She realised that 'people like me, girls with skin the color of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails, could also exist in literature. I started to write about things I recognized' (2009). Chimamanda's story demonstrates the importance of critically reviewing the imagery and content which we absorb everyday and being aware of what content we deliver to children as educators through the lessons we present. Visual literacy is 'education that enhances understanding of the role and function of images in representation and communication, especially in the media.' (Newfield, D., 2011, p.82). When it comes to the Art History & Appreciation curriculum it must be considered, what imagery, whose history and what context are we exploring with our students.

> Learning to see the invisible at the edge of the visible frame, which means questioning the ways images in the media, popular culture, and fine art create invisibilities. What this means is thinking through how vision as a social optic simultaneously creates visibility and invisibility and how both visibility/invisibility are mobilized in our art classrooms. (Desai, D., 2020, p.16)

The *Intercultural Education in the Post-Primary School: Guidelines for Schools(2006)* outlines 'opportunities for dealing with identity and belonging, similar-

ity and difference, human rights and responsibilities, discrimination and equality and conflict and peace. All subject areas contain opportunities for engaging in intercultural education.' (NCCA, 2006, p.50) In particular the study of Visual Art is well suited to 'communicating the rich diversity of a global culture and expressing common universal human themes.' (Tormey, 2006, p.62).

How are the values and principles of Intercultural Education reflected in the Leaving Certificate Visual Art curriculum in Ireland?

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) states that

> Art is a method of social commentary and as such has always played an important role in reflecting contemporary society and in affecting changes in the social and political aspects of it too. Through their understanding and knowledge of visual culture, students will learn how other artists have held up a mirror to their world and have captured, in their work, more than just a snapshot in time. They have captured the nuances of the society of their time and made them available to their audiences for comment and later audiences for understanding. (NCCA, 2018, p. 15)

The NCCA also state that 'We live in a globalised world and it is important that students learn not only about Irish artwork but also that of Europe and the world' (NCCA, 2018, p. 23). There are guidelines available for schools on Intercultural Education, developed by the NCCA in 2006, though these guidelines do not appear to be mentioned in the new Leaving Certificate Visual Art curriculum.

The *Intercultural education in the post-primary school* (NCCA, 2006) guidelines provide guidance for teachers and school management on: mediating the curriculum in a way that reflects cultural diversity; making the curriculum as accessible as possible for children from ethnic minority groups; enhancing the intercultural experience of all

pupils; creating an inclusive school culture.

> In the art classroom--where art, identity, and culture are inextricably linked--racially and culturally responsive teaching play a critical role in how teachers interact with students and ultimately how students themselves come to understand cultural diversity, social inclusion, and antiracist behaviors. (Lee, 2012)

Educate Together (ET) schools are co-educational, multi denominational schools that place emphasis on an 'inclusive and equality-based school ethos'(Educate Together, nd). The ethos of ET schools espouses equity of access to all children and families, regardless of their religion, identity, race, ethnicity, language, lifestyle, class, gender or ability. These schools are run according to the Educate Together Charter, which 'arms that children of all social, cultural, religious and non-religious backgrounds have a right to an education that reflects their individual identity while exploring the different values and traditions of the world in which they live' (Bourke, M, Kinsella, W. and Prendeville, P., 2019, p.4). Part of this commitment to creating an inclusive school is the presence of Ethical Education as a subject at ET schools. Ethical Education is a subject taught in Educate Together schools, at both primary and post-primary level. There are nine strands of the Junior Cycle Ethical Education curriculum, two of which are;

> 5. Diversity in Ireland: Students explore diversity in a local and national context and think critically about the experience of minority groups in Irish society, particularly experiences of discrimination.

> 6. Migration: Students develop an enhanced awareness of the language associated with migration; discover how migration has had an impact on Ireland and; critically analyse how the media reports migration in different contexts. (Educate Together, nd)

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It appears that in Ireland, including cultural diversity within teaching content is left at the discretion of the teacher and perhaps the school management. It may be worth exploring in further research the extent to which Educate Together schools in particular include cultural diversity as part of their Visual Art curriculum delivery in light of their inclusion of Ethical Education in their core subjects.

Dilger (1994, p. 51) talks about a 'culturally sensitive curriculum' that should be open and responsive to students' needs. 'Multicultural education should not be additive, but integral to the curriculum'. While the literature indicates that this implementation of a truly inclusive intercultural environment is hard to get right, Dilger says

> The idea is not to abandon an existing curriculum based on Western culture, but to expand it to accommodate cultural plurality. In addition, it is important to integrate multicultural art with other subject areas in a transdisciplinary approach to teaching. (1994, p.52)

It has been noted that leaving the inclusion of cultural diversity within the curriculum at the discretion of individual teachers can lead to a lack of inclusion. (Lee, 2012; Bourke, M, Kinsella, W. and Prendeville, P. 2019). This was due to uncertainties around how to include discussions about Race and Ethnicity and a lack of confidence and training. The non-mandatory nature of the cultural diversity element within the Irish curriculum means that in many instances, note Deegan, Devine, and Lodge (2004), teachers lack balance and diversity in their teaching. (Parker-Jenkins, M., Masterson M., 2013, p.487)

Conclusion

In conclusion, the literature shows that cultural diversity is still absent from the History and Appreciation of Art curriculum. Although this may be true, Kraehe suggests

> whether they acknowledge it or not, art teachers are presented with daily opportunities in which to seek justice in art education. If conceived as a multidimensional process, an equity mindset can enable educators to summon the audacity to intervene in the histories we have inherited and rewrite their own stories to change tomorrow's practice. (2017)

In reality, any active effort to create a truly Intercultural environment will need support and training and a curriculum that provides for it. According to O'Kelly (2020) 'when it comes to students our classrooms have never been more ethnically diverse, but that diversity is starkly absent at the top of the classroom. The Irish teacher is still almost invariably white and middle class'. For this reason we must consider how this lack of diversity at the 'top of the classroom' is perceived by an ethnically diverse group of students and how without concerted effort to include and develop an intercultural approach in the art room we may continue to see a lack of cultural diversity develop in the Irish education system. The reasons for the lack of diversity in the teaching population is beyond the scope of this study but should be considered for future research. The cultural and ethnic make-up of the current NCCA board and panels may also be considered for potential future research in order to lead to a truly intercultural curriculum development in Ireland.

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