

European Teachers' Concerns and Experiences in Responding to Diversity in the Classroom

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Introduction

There seems to be a higher challenge today for teachers across Europe and the USA to respond to an increasing diversity of students. Responding to diversity implies understanding individual student characteristics and matching differentiated teaching within an inclusive atmosphere to enable everyone to participate actively in all classroom activities (see e.g., Gay, 2000).

Student diversity is seen as arising from three main sources:

(a) A cultural one due to the impact of an increasing number of immigrants and increasing mobility within and across countries. Recent EU reports note that "Teachers may be confronted with different cultures, religions, and languages in a single learning environment" (Eurydice, 2002, p.48); "Teachers/trainers are faced with socially, culturally and ethnically diverse pupils/trainees and challenges them to deal with more and more heterogeneous classes" (EC Directorate General for Education and Culture 2003, 35).

(b) Both the above reports add a second major factor: the policy of mainstreaming of students with impairments or special needs, which calls "for the acquisition by teachers of specific skills, such as the ability to offer teaching geared to individual needs and adapt the curriculum accordingly" (Eurydice 2002, 47).

One may add to this the wider democratic concerns on the entitlement of each student to reach his or her potential, whether as gifted or as having a different learning style: "It is unacceptable for any teacher to respond to any group of children (or any individual child) as though the children were inappropriate, inconvenient, beyond hope, or not in need of focused attention" (Tomlinson 2001, 21). "The teacher ... has to adapt or prepare the curriculum in such a way that the needs of all pupils, those with special educational needs, gifted pupils

and their peers, are sufficiently met" (Meijer 2003, Para 3.2.2).

(c) There is also a new concern about the difficulties that are faced in modern society by youths who fail to achieve adequate levels of literacy or drop out of school, together with an awareness of the multiplicity and complexity of competencies required in today's society (Gregory and Kuzmich 2005). This concern has been strong in Europe but is also a worldwide concern:

In the learning society, social stratification is increasingly based on a division between the haves and have-nots in terms of skills and qualifications. Dropping out from school, therefore, has much more lasting consequences than it had in the past, since it can mark an individual for life and greatly narrow the range of career choices open to them. Schools are at the centre of the learning society and life-long learning begins there. (EC 2001, Sect. 4.5, see also Eurydice 1994, UNESCO 2004)

There is a growing literature on how schools and teachers should respond to this diversity under the theme 'differentiated teaching', particularly from the USA, with two elaborate training packs from the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, as well as by UNESCO (2004). The UNESCO material uses a very similar model to the most widely known model proposed by Tomlinson (2003), namely to provide a match between the two elements in the teaching and learning process, namely the diversity of students needs and strengths with the diversity of the curriculum, as shown in Figure 1.

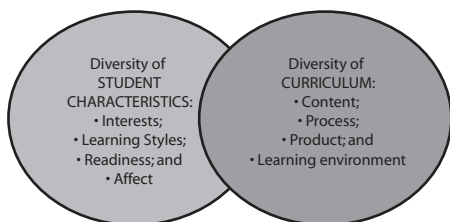


Figure 1: Matching a diversified curriculum to the diversity of student strengths and needs

The present study is part of a 3-year Comenius 2.1 project aimed at using the above model, with a clearer emphasis on an inclusive culture, in an internet-based training module for enabling teachers in primary schools to respond to pupil diversity. However, before developing the module, we wanted to get a feel for how teachers, in actual European 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 empirical studies of actual teachers. One of these 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, 150).

The present study is an attempt to find out how some teachers in Europe, who are trying to reach out to all their students, are experiencing the challenge. The following specific research questions were adopted:

- 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?

Method

Given the above aim of the study, a qualitative design was adopted rather than a decontextualised positivist methodology. This was based on a constructivist paradigm, namely that there are multiple, socially constructed realities regarding the phenomenon of responsive teaching, that there will be an interactive link between the researchers and participants, and that the contextual factors for each teacher and country remain a significant condition to understanding the phenomenon. It was decided to use in-depth interviewing of teachers as a strategy for such explanation of the issues.

Purposive sampling of teachers actively trying to reach out to their students was adopted in order to be able to capture successful processes as well as challenges that would be useful to teachers interested in this phenomenon. Participants were expected to meet the following criteria:

- Primary school teachers who have received full professional training as teachers.

- Are currently teaching and have been in full time teaching in a primary school for at least one year.
- Teachers who are actively trying to respond to student diversity.

Semi-structured interviews of around an hour each were undertaken with a total of 35 teachers, stratified as follows: (a) there would be 5 from each country; (b) each would be teaching in a different primary schools so that at least 35 different primary school contexts would be studied; (c) as far as possible the selected sample would be teaching across the different ages of primary schooling – from 4 to 12 years.

This paper reports particularly on the actual Malta sample. These were all relatively young teachers with a teaching experience of from 6-11 years, teaching 5-10-year-olds, in class groups ranging from 16 to 29 (see Table 1). Four of them were the class teachers, while the fifth taught English and history across the three 9-year-age class groups. All had peripatetic teachers for PE, Art, Music and Personal and Social Development (PSD); and all also had the support of a remedial teacher working on a withdrawal basis; two had a teaching assistant in class.

Table 1: Teaching experience and class taught by respondent teachers

Index No	Teaching experience (yrs)	Present class age level	Class composition	Teaching responsibility	Support system
M1	8	7-8 yrs (Yr 3)	Mixed ability and gender (12 m, 12 f)	Class teacher, but other teachers for PE, Music, Art, PSD	School Literacy Support Teacher
M2	10	7-8 yrs (Yr 3)	Mixed ability (13 m, 12fm)	Class teacher, but other teachers for PE, Music, Art, PSD	School Literacy Support Teacher
M3	9	7-8 yrs (Yr 3)	Mixed ability (11 m, 13 f)	Class teacher, but other teachers for PE, Music, Art, PSD	School literacy support teacher; Assistant for 2 students with SEN
M4	6	5-6 yrs (Yr 1)	Mixed ability (7 m, 9 f)	Class teacher, but other teachers for PE, Music, Art, PSD	School Literacy Support Teacher
M5	11	9-10 yrs (Yr 5)	Mixed ability Male only 29/28	Subject teacher (Eng & Hist) for two classes	School Literacy Support Teacher & Assistant for student with SEN

Each teacher responded to a semi-structured interview aimed at eliciting a description of teacher experiences relevant to responsive teaching in the different cultural contexts of each partner country, and specifically about:

- 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?

The interview schedule was developed at a transnational

meeting of the 9 (2 later dropped out) Project Partners in Seville and was then piloted with one teacher from each country. Very few changes were made to the schedule with emphasis being on ensuring the teachers had the opportunity to express their own perceptions on the phenomenon. Data of the first interview from each country was transcribed and first qualitatively and thematically analysed by each partner separately, and then brought together to develop a common coding framework. Such thematic analysis was achieved by categorising each paragraph of the interviews into relevant categories. ATLAS.ti software was used by the coordinator of the analysis process. This common coding framework was then applied to a thematic analysis of all interviews by each partner allowing for possible new themes or modifications relevant to the particular culture and teachers of each country. This paper reports on the detailed analysis of the data from the five Maltese teachers.

Results

The analysis of the first interview from each country led to the construction of a common framework of five main issues as shown in Figure 2. (1) There was first of all a clear emphasis among all these teachers on the importance of *adopting a positive attitude to diversity*: of wanting to reach all students, believing and feeling accountable for each one's learning, caring about each one's progress and happiness, and enabling each one's participation. They mentioned the need for 'pedagogy conversations' in order to reflect and improve their responding. (2) The teachers also did not leave appreciation of diversity to chance but actively tried to develop inclusive and solidarity values in their students as they strived to build a classroom community. (3) In fact all teachers also spoke of the need for *building collaborative networks*: firstly an interpersonal relationship with each of their students; secondly among their students; and finally with classroom and other school staff and administration, parents and other professionals. (4) In addition, these teachers used a variety of strategies, including group work and a diversified curriculum, for engaging the whole class in multi-interest, multi-media and multilevel activities, using a lot of flexibility and creativity. (5) Finally, it was noted that teachers did not see differentiation as an easy option. They also spoke of how they tried to *face the challenges to responding to diversity*: when the rest of the school did not share the same values; when the grading system excluded the less able students; when deprived family backgrounds did not offer support to students; when they had to manage children with communication and behaviour difficulties.

The nature of the five issues and their relevance to responding to diversity will be illustrated through the data from the Maltese teachers.

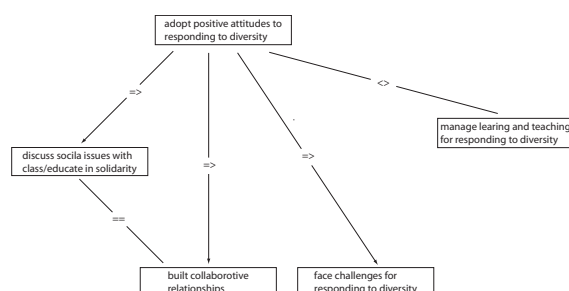


Figure 2: Five major issues in responding to diversity identified by teachers

Results theme 1: Adopt a positive attitude to diversity

All the interviewees mentioned in one way or another that the teacher had to have, as a basic requirement for responding to student diversity, an attitude in favour of respect for each student's entitlement to a quality education. In the Malta data, this positive attitude was demonstrated through at least five distinct attitudes: (i) an expression of 'love' and respect for each child as an individual and equal person, and a persevering belief in and personal accountability for his or her potential for learning: Teacher M2 saw her class as 'one happy family'; (ii) recognising student diversity as an enrichment rather than as a problem for the whole class (diversities mentioned being family background, character, behaviour, gender, learning patterns, abilities and multiple intelligences, readiness levels, special needs, ethnicity, religion and subcultures, newcomers, individual's good and bad days, and different class-groups); (iii) adopting a holistic approach to the children's learning and development; and (iv) most interestingly, an explicit avoidance of devaluing of students through differentiation. Thus, teacher M1 reported:

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)

This itself was evidence of another explicit positive attitude of self reflection: on teacher called it engagement in 'pedagogic conversations' with colleagues and other educators.

Results theme 2: Educate in appreciation of diversity and solidarity

The interviewees also felt the need to educate others to appreciate diversity. They engaged specifically in educating their whole class in an appreciation of diversity and the values of inclusion and solidarity, and worked towards building the class group as a small community: 'We are one family'; 'We all belong to the same class - nobody should be left out' (M2). These were taught across the curriculum. One teacher specifically mentioned training students in social skills; one mentioned the need to educate the parents in the rationale of differentiation; and another mentioned the need for a 'culturation' process with school staff as 'selling and joining'.

Results theme 3: Build collaboration

Another issue raised frequently by the interviewees was the need for building community and supportive relationships. One teacher (M1) in fact suggested that training in interpersonal skills was an essential preparation for responding to diversity. They referred to teacher-pupil relationships; relationships among the children; and relationships with other staff and parents.

A distinguishing feature of these teachers was their readiness to connect with their students, to build a personal individual relationship with their students, also using self-disclosure or sharing of interests to 'get closer', 'to connect', and involving the parents. They sought to understand the children's 'personalities', what made them tick. These teachers reflected on the need to relate to each child, to be patient and persevering. They tried to use the relationship as a motivation for more effort, and were sensitive to personal difficulties,

trying to meet the children's needs for individual attention and sometimes even for temporary needs, such as a difficult time at home. They worked at communicating in various ways with hard to reach children. They used empathy both in relation to the children and their parents.

These teachers also believed the children could help each other through their diversity. They created opportunities for children to interact and build relationships in sometimes contrasting ways, both by asking them which child they preferred to sit near to, but also sometimes by getting them to sit near unknown peers to build new friendships. They encouraged peer support, sometimes monitoring it to see it was done properly.

All the interviewees talked about group work of various kinds, from pair work and peer tutoring arrangements to different flexible groupings. They stressed that they did not group them into fixed ability groups, but rather, for instance in complementary learning style groups, or pairs that could support each other in different areas. They noted that some children still preferred 'solitary' work but also that others were already group leaders. They justified group work as necessary to enable them to offer individual attention. Reference was also made to specific training of students in peer tutoring and social interaction skills.

All the teachers also highlighted the importance of having a positive collaborative relationship with the administration for being flexible with the curriculum and getting relevant resources. In addition, they talked of collaboration with other staff, particularly those teaching in the same year group and support teachers - referred to as 'Complementary Teachers' in Malta: they tried to relate the work done in class with the support given by the Complementary Teacher and facilitator (or teacher assistant for children with Special Educational Needs), and most preferred them to work with the child inside the classroom. Two of the five teachers at the time had a facilitator in their class while the other three had had one in some of their previous years of teaching. They all appreciated that support, talking about the facilitator as a helper for all the class that enabled individualisation of support. One of the teachers suggested that there should indeed be a facilitator in every class.

All five teachers also highlighted the need for connecting with and getting the cooperation of the parents. The two teachers (M1 and 2) who mentioned the metaphor of the class as the family often referred to how they tried to win over parent support, also showing attempts at empathising with their situation, and referring to their work satisfaction as arising from the parents as well as the children being happy with the progress achieved. Two also talked about the need to compensate for difficulties the children might be experiencing at home. The other two engaged in 'parent education'.

Connections to outside school support was also mentioned, particularly for reaching children they could not understand. This included input from a psychologist, or speech therapist. Reference was also made to peripatetic teachers, including those for Early Intervention. One teacher also mentioned the importance of outside consultation on differentiation itself as a teaching strategy.

Results theme 4: Organise responsive teaching

These teachers were actively seeking to respond to the needs of all students through actual differentiated teaching which is captured in this theme. Their attempt was evident in three major ways: First of all they dedicated time and energy for getting to know their students' characters, interests, experience and learning styles - particularly at the beginning of the year. Secondly, they adapted the learning environment to make it conducive to learning, and thirdly the curriculum,

mostly in terms of using multilevel goals, using different teaching strategies, and expecting different levels of products.

(1) Know your children

First of all they talked of the need and ways of knowing their students both as children - such as being a particular football fan or having an interest in Vikings, and as learners including their preference for learning with others or on their own and with whom they preferred to sit. One mentioned October as a busy time for getting to know them. Asking the previous teacher was seen as a double edged tool as it could bias the teacher; one used formal 'questionnaires' as well as informal talk during activity time, and tests for getting to know their readiness in each subject. One teacher pointed out the need to use the Maltese language and Maltese culture in reading texts. Another the need to learn about the specific needs of a child with special educational needs.

(2) Create an environment conducive to and supportive for learning

These teachers talked a lot about the need to create a safe emotional climate through relationships to support children's learning. They were sensitive to children's basic needs, such as for talking about their experiences and listening to stories, or for 'moving about', and for less demanding work in the afternoon. One teacher also reference to giving attention to a child's health needs. Another talked about arranging the physical environment to be conducive to learning, both in terms of lighting and seating, for instance, as well as a pleasant atmosphere through background music. All the teachers showed sensitivity to children's affective response to learning, achievement motivation, fear of failing and problems of low self esteem with regards to academic achievement, as well as individual shyness.

They used specific strategies for encouraging student progress. One way in which these teachers tried to differentiate to enhance children's engagement was by offering choice of activities to the students, such as for choosing their own library book or even reading their own stories to the class, even choosing whether to work with number lines or mentally in maths, while ensuring they experience the width of the curriculum.

All mentioned a variety of ways in which they tried to ensure children were enabled to participate effectively. Besides adapting the curriculum generally to levels within children's ability, they reported such strategies as providing more individual monitoring and attention, including breaking a task into smaller steps and prompting. Some teachers also arranged for such individual support to be given by the children's peers. There were also references to longer-term support in collaboration with the parents; one mentioned this as a whole-school strategy, for instance through parent training in the ways of working with a new maths syllabus.

(3) Adapt the curriculum to student diversity

In describing most successful engagement, they did not really make reference to times when they prepared greatly differentiated lessons. Rather reference was mainly made to activities when children had a say in what they were learning, both through some level of choice, or when they were allowed to take the initiative to develop a topic in their own varied ways. Certain topics or activities grabbed students' attention and motivation. These often included dramatic presentation of stories and accounts including the 'teacher's passion', practical hands-on activities, use of the computer, discussions, games, project work, and outings. One reported 'When it's something not academic!' On the other hand others gave examples also from reading as long as it was varied: 'Not just writing'. The

common feature that seems to be found in these is that the activity 'made sense' to them, 'It hit a chord', and allowed for different levels and modes of involvement, and also importantly often gave scope for the students' own initiative.

The activities mentioned above included multilevel activities as almost inherent in the nature of the activity. These teachers, however, also took care to organise multilevel activities to meet the needs of different levels of readiness of their students. They referred particularly to the use of visual support for literacy and number work as well as graded materials. They allowed for differences in both rate of completion of tasks as well as rate of acquisition of concepts. One of the teachers (M2) clearly distinguished different levels of ability in terms of fast and slow task completion. Teachers also mentioned the difference in the amount of explanations or need for repetition by different students or even class-groups. The teacher who taught Year 1 (M4) made numerous references to the children's different rates of progress in the main areas of literacy and maths, which she had to adapt in terms of levels offered as well as number of repetitions required in order not to discourage her children from engaging in these activities.

There was also some reference to multiple intelligences and learning patterns: two of the teachers mentioned instances where a child had a strength in one area (e.g. sports) while being weak in another (e.g. literacy). Two of them made use of the *Let Me Learn* learning inventory for identifying children's preferred learning patterns to be able to support their learning: one reported that the majority of her children preferred 'sequential' learning, 'that is they called for detailed instructions'.

Most mentioned differentiation by giving the same task but then expecting different levels of product. One teacher (M2), however, showed concern about whether this might lead to low expectations for some children.

All the teachers made reference to the need for flexibility in their curriculum and timetable. They allowed for various disruptions beyond their control. One also arranged her lessons so that she could do the more difficult work with one group of students at a time when the other group was withdrawn by the support teacher. Curricular flexibility was also reported in terms of being happy to see children learning a story even if they did not acquire the English vocabulary that was the formal aim of the lesson; or even wider flexibility in the general educational aims of one teacher who reported being more concerned about her impact on the children's personal growth than about 'academics'. Another important flexibility was in the application of rules: such as not bothering too much with some noisiness; one teacher also reported how she would punish children who did not do their homework, but made an exception for one who was having problems at home; while another felt an 'intelligent' child was bored with the homework and so she gave her 'more creative' homework. Another important flexibility was in the organisation of groups in a variety of ways. Finally, these teachers also reported being open to new ideas and understandings, such as needing to try different things in different years and with different groups, or even understanding that working alone can be part of children's development.

Results theme 5: Face challenges for responding to diversity

Finally, these teachers did not say it was easy to respond to student diversity. In fact they reported several challenges they had to face, including contextual as well as within child difficulties.

(1) Contextual issues

A difficult challenge was building relations and mutual

understanding among children and with some parents. The teachers interviewed were teaching in relatively typical Maltese schools and they had worked on building a class community, but there was still some reference to fighting among the children as interfering with the creation of a supportive community. No severe family deprivation was reported, but one teacher felt lack of understanding of her efforts by the parent who thought her child was 'perfect', and another referred to problems from separated families.

Another constraint lay in the curriculum. Most referred to an 'overloaded curriculum' imposed on the teacher as hindering the flexibility necessary to ensure each child's engagement. Moreover, as streaming of children by examination in Malta starts at the age of 8 years, these teachers felt the prevalent streaming context presented obstacles to responding to pupil diversity, particularly due to pressure to cover the syllabus. One teacher (M5) who has been engaged with the issue of differentiation also at the theoretical level, actually raised the issue of changing from normative to formative assessment as the most important challenge she is currently experiencing.

In relation to this, also, they referred to the need for more adequate resources, particularly computer software programmes (in addition to having available computers maintained in working condition), and also the possibility of choosing one's own reading scheme and using school funds for curricular needs. One teacher also reported how she built differentiated resources over the years as she was teaching the same year (for teaching Maltese for which there is a lack of commercially available resources).

All the teachers suggested it would be better if they had less children or extra personnel in class, even though the number of children was rather low, ranging mostly from 16 to 15 with one of 29 where there was also a facilitator. They reported difficulties in giving all children opportunities for full participation in lessons and for teacher time, though they made use of group work, even group corrections, and peer support to manage giving attention to individual children or groups of children.

(2) Within-child difficulties

Teachers were particularly concerned when they could not find a way of raising a child's interest: One teacher spoke of concern about a child who was explicitly refusing to have anything to do with school, while another referred a child as being locked off and the teacher not yet having found the key. They pointed out two types of children as particularly difficult to reach: those that had communication and socio-emotional difficulties and those with behaviour difficulties or both. Communication difficulties included both language development as well as shyness and lack of affective response.

These experienced teachers were not faced with severe disruption in class. But they still were concerned about difficult behaviour. One teacher felt the need for training on how to manage children with hyperactivity. Another described a child with relationship difficulties at home and school due also partly to being ethnically different.

Finally, reference was made to the need for long-term thinking: development of relevant teachers' attitudes, skills and community building needed time.

Conclusion

The aim of this qualitative study was to elicit from teachers perceptions and descriptions of issues related to responding to the diversity of students' strengths and needs in actual classrooms. The five major themes and sub-themes raise

several important issues that teachers who are interested in reaching out to all children need to address. It must be pointed out that the findings are not meant to give a picture of what is actually going on in all classrooms, but rather what is possible to achieve in real classrooms with teachers who are faced with, as one teacher observed, all the multiplicity of demands in particular actual classroom contexts.

What they say fits in with what Tomlinson (e.g. 2001) has garnered over the years she has been consulting with schools in the USA. But, importantly, they relate more to her latest publication (2003) where she gives much more importance to the teacher's attitude (using metaphors), to the emotional aspect of differentiation (she adds knowing children's 'affect' in addition to interest, readiness and learning profile), and to the importance of creating relationships and an inclusive and supportive culture.

The findings point to the importance of training teachers through personal reflection on their implicit approaches to classes and the curriculum for the development of an appreciation of the potential enrichment of diversity, in addition to training in interpersonal collaboration skills, and skills in diversifying the content, process and product of the curriculum.

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