

# INTERACT

## WP 13 Teachers as cultural workers

Centre for Citizenship and Human Rights Education, University of Leeds

Institute of Education, University of London

Drawing on data from a set of teacher interviews, WP13 aims to analyse teachers' understandings of their roles as cultural workers in a multicultural society (see WP11 for information relating to the teacher sample). Teachers were invited to consider the ways that multiculturalism influences the way that they carry out their work and to reflect on education as a process which supports students to participate as citizens within a multicultural society. The teachers were invited to reflect on the development of students' multiple identities (as members of specific ethnic or religious communities and as members of local, national, European and global communities) and the ways in which these actual or potential identities inform their pedagogical approaches.

There is a strong correlation between teachers' understandings of their roles as cultural workers and the ethnic composition of the school in which they work. Teachers from schools with either ethnically diverse student populations or where the majority of students are from a specific visible minority community tend to be more confident in articulating how multiculturalism can be practised and consider themselves better prepared to engage in this work. They are also able to suggest a larger variety of educational methods through which they can engage in this work.

Teachers' understanding of their roles and practices as cultural workers are related to the meaning that they attribute to the term 'multicultural'. For most teachers, multicultural is a descriptive term they apply to a school; it is synonymous with an ethnically diverse student population. It does not relate to the ethnic make-up of the teacher workforce nor does it necessarily imply the representation of a variety of ethnic or cultural groups in the school curriculum. Most interviewees believe that citizenship education provides opportunities (rather than with explicit guidelines) for the cultivation of skills and knowledge to equip students as citizens in a multicultural society. Nevertheless, these teachers tend to make a strong correlation between citizenship education and multicultural education.

Teachers from minority ethnic communities differ in their analysis in certain respects from those from the mainstream. Our analysis reveals that teachers who identify themselves as members of cultural minorities have an increased awareness of cultural diversity and of their role as cultural workers. These teachers assert their desire to promote awareness among their students of cultural diversity. At the same time they appear more active in the cultivation of students' multiple identities. In two cases where mainstream White teachers expressed high levels of commitment to multiculturalism they explained this in terms of their exposure to diversity in the family or through the experience of working abroad.

Interviewees' responses reflect a wide spectrum of pedagogic approaches which vary from 'factual knowledge about other cultural communities' within British society to direct engagement and interaction with members of these communities. Some teachers extend this work beyond the nation, focussing on an examination of social issues in a range of international contexts.

The teachers' educational aims are similarly diverse. White teachers in schools with predominantly White student populations tend to focus on the knowledge, beliefs and traditions of other cultures. Students' awareness of global issues seems to be low among their educational priorities. On the other hand, in schools with predominantly Black and minority ethnic student populations address the global dimension more directly. In these schools, multiculturalism extends beyond knowledge to the provision of opportunities for active engagement with the culture of 'others'.

Beyond these differences, teachers in our sample seem to agree on a number of key issues. First, they see citizenship education as breaking down cultural barriers constructed within (and by) students' families. A number of teachers see the school as an environment which is representative of the wider community. For this reason it offers opportunity for most students to experience and develop an understanding of the meaning and dimensions of multiculturalism.

Secondly, teachers believe there are limited opportunities within school for students from minority communities to develop a deeper understanding of their own culture. They see two main obstacles to the development of students' understanding: one is teachers' own lack of cultural knowledge and the other is the misrepresentation of some ethnic groups within the mainstream media.

Thirdly, teachers in our sample do not explicitly address European identity. Even among those teachers who are conscious of students' (and citizens') multiple identities, Europe seems to be absent from their list priorities. None of the interviewees refer to European citizenship. Instead, a number promote greater global awareness through links with schools in Africa or Asia.

In conclusion, it appears that teachers' understanding of their role as cultural workers is affected by two major factors: the cultural diversity of student populations they teach and their own cultural backgrounds. These two factors play an important role in influencing the extent to which they take advantage of the opportunities to engage as cultural workers in shaping pedagogy, curriculum, and school ethos.