Cultural threads in three primary schools

Introducing a critical cosmopolitan frame

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This paper explores headteachers' and teachers' perceptions of foreign languages (FL) and cultural learning in three primary schools in areas of disadvantage in England. Drawing upon a new theoretical frame for primary languages – Critical Cosmopolitanism (Delanty, 2006; Beck and Sznaider, 2006) and The Grammar of Culture (Holliday, 2018), we argue that the grand narrative of a target language inhabited by a target culture is outdated and approaches to cultural learning in primary schools could lead the way. Byram (1997), argues that intercultural competence is a fundamental justification for including languages in the curriculum, as it helps learners see beyond their own cultural assumptions thereby enriching their understanding of themselves, others and the world. There is substantial evidence that successful and sustainable language learning depends on certain key drivers such as supportive and effective leadership, instruction time, school commitment and an adequate teacher supply (Cable et al., 2010; Wade & Marshall, 2009; Mitchell, 2014; Enever, 2011). Many studies report that most learners enjoy languages and find lessons fun, particularly activities such as songs, stories and intercultural events (Driscoll et al., 2004; Cable et al. 2010). The discourse on conditions for sustainable inclusive practice however, is less commonplace and up till now, little is known about FL learning in areas of high deprivation (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2011). Evidence is drawn from headteachers and teachers in three schools in this interpretative study. All three headteachers were recognised as effective and the schools were categorized as 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted. Students made good progress although attainment was not necessarily high in comparison with national standards. Teachers and headteachers were committed to cultural learning. Staff adopted creative approaches to cultural learning with threads that weave through the school, however, the findings also indicate that traditional notions of a mono or homogenised national culture with associated stereotypes linger in teachers' framing of FL as a curriculum subject. Data was analysed thematically. All interviews were audio recorded and names anonymised to ensure confidentiality. All stages and parts of the study underwent rigorous

and ongoing ethical scrutiny. The paper highlights the need for a more personalised approach to cultural learning and argues for a creative re-think of FL pedagogy in specific schools.

Introduction

The discussion of primary school language education connects with a wider issue of the relationship between language and culture. In the opening sections we therefore present these issues within the particularly poignant critical cosmopolitan frame which questions everything we have commonly thought about language education. This study considers the cultural offer provided by three schools to young children, primarily in relation to foreign languages but also across the curriculum as a whole. This study has been undertaken within the context of 'Brexit' and the divide across the UK, created by the referendum of 2016, where UK citizens voted whether to stay or leave the European Union. Who is part of the 'homeland' and British, and who is not became part of the political campaign with issues about language, heritage and culture highlighted with divisive intent.

Languages was made statutory from the age of seven in English primary schools in September 2013. In secondary schools it is a statutory subject from the age of 11 to 14. A clear intention for cultural and intercultural experiences is woven throughout the purpose of study for foreign languages in the National Curriculum: *'Learning a foreign language is a liberation from insularity and provides an opening to other cultures. A high-quality languages education should foster pupils' curiosity and deepen their understanding of the world.'* (Department for Education, 2013). The implication is that studying a foreign language is a deeply transformative experience, which, as long as it is not associated with a narrow view of culture, will help liberate learners from a blinkered imprisonment in their 'own culture', or from being locked into an essentialist view of the world.

A growing body of literature exists about teaching foreign languages, however, in the UK, there is still limited work in schools in disadvantaged areas. This study by contrast offers some insight into the language and cultural offer of schools in 'disadvantaged' coastal areas. One primary school is situated in a rural working-class area on a peninsula, surrounded on all three sides by water. The other two schools are situated on large urban estates in coastal towns. Most pupils are of White British heritage. Two of the schools have an above average or well-above average proportion of disadvantaged pupils (supported by the pupil premium

which provides additional government funding for free school meals). Ethical considerations were followed.

Context of the study

According to recent evidence from the Sutton Trust, White Working Class are the worst performing ethnic group in UK (Kirby & Cullinane, 2016). This research highlights the exam results at the age of 16 and argues that only 28% of students on free school meals (FSM) achieve five good GCSEs and that white birth pupils are the least likely of all pupils to attend university. The principal finding of the latest Language Trends survey (Tinsley and Dolezal, 2018), highlights the inequity of language learning at school. Secondary schools in disadvantaged areas tend to dedicate a shorter amount of curriculum time to languages and fewer students opt to take foreign languages at the national GCSE examination at the age of 16. The report indicates that over one third of state schools report that whole groups of students are not taught languages in Year 9. Evidence about foreign languages is bleak, particularly in disadvantaged areas, where student attainment overall in national examinations, at the age of 16 and 18 is a serious cause for concern. In relation to primary schools, the survey shows that languages remain a marginalised subject due to other competing demands of the curriculum.

Where attainment is below the national average, pressure can build in schools to focus more heavily on a diet of English, Literacy and Mathematics. A greater proportion of curriculum time is allocated to these core subjects leaving all other subjects competing for time and emphasis. Despite prioritising the core subjects in primary and secondary school, recent research by the Children's Commissioner for England reports that nearly 100,000 young people leave education at the age of 18 without substantive qualifications (Longfield, 2019). The number of children receiving free school meals without appropriate qualifications for employment or further study when they leave school, increased from 28% to 37% over the last few years. These statistics represent nearly 100,000 individuals and numbers are rapidly rising. The corresponding attainment gap between those that have and those that do not, is rising.

Schools reducing languages are more likely to have a higher proportion of students offered free school meals (Tinsley & Dolezal, 2018). A number of coastal areas across the UK are sites of major disadvantage, particularly those that are not connected, through effective infrastructure, to vibrant economically successful towns. There is, however, a paucity of research about young people in coastal areas rather, research about disadvantage primarily focuses on inner cities (Reid Westergaard, 2017). Reid and Westergaard's research indicates that growing up in

a coastal town has a significant impact on participants' lives in relation to the decisions they make, their perceptions of the barriers they face, the challenges and the factors that influence the choices they make. Inner-city areas, they argue, have a 360-degree outlook, whereas coastal towns are restricted to a 180-degree perspective with the sea on one side of the landmass. The study focused on career opportunities and how they are limited but the question arises about the young in primary school and how they perceive their culture and opportunities. If indeed foreign languages as a curriculum subject, is a *'liberation from insularity'* (Department for Education, 2014) and cultivates such cultural advantages, why is it so marginalised for children who arguably would benefit the most.

An important study recently published by the British Academy presents a systematic review of international evidence (Woll & Wei, 2019). The review follows the adopted a Cochrane-approach to reviewing literature, which, answers specific research questions by identifying, evaluating and synthesising all the empirical evidence against eligibility criteria. In other words, evidence is 'weighed' for quality rather than a narrative review which, can be more selective in what is included and excluded from an academic paper. A range of key stakeholders or users also were interviewed about their perceptions of language learning. The report questioned the relationship between language learning, learners' academic achievements and the cognitive benefits of learning a foreign language as well as how schools use languages as part of an overall suite of experiences to encourage, enliven and enrich children's lives. Their evidence suggests that benefits of studying a new language improves attention and mental alertness after only one week of study. They selected two major themes for the meta-analysis: the relationship of language learning and academic achievement across the curriculum and the influence on creativity. They found that 90% of studies report a positive impact on learning across English language, literacy, maths and science, while the remaining 10% show no impact; these studies include learners from a variety of countries, different language combinations, and varied socio-economic backgrounds.

Why then are languages marginalised in schools where students would arguably benefit the most? It is not within the remit of this paper to interrogate the blatant and horrible inequality of the English education system, rather, this paper pivots around two competing narratives regarding how schools manage the cultural and intercultural development within an educational setting, and the role of foreign languages in a school's cultural offer now that the subject is a legal requirement for all children from the age of 7.

Essentialist language and culture narrative

The first, more established narrative, which we consider to be problematic, relates to a grand narrative of language and culture, in which the target language is considered to inhabit or be inhabited by a target culture which is as alien to the child as the language itself. An immediate implication is that children are led to a polarised, 'us' and 'them' belief that they are learning 'another culture' with a content of values and behaviours that is as essentially different to their own as the vocabulary and grammar of the target language. This narrative is critiqued in a number of ways from the perspective of what has been termed by some a critical cosmopolitan narrative of culture.

Critical cosmopolitan narrative

The critical cosmopolitan recognises complexity and fluidity in social processes and the multiple ways through which the social world is constructed in different contexts with different types of modernity (Delanty, 2006) and acknowledges that cultural realities are built at an individual level around individual's personal circumstances that dissolve structural and spatial boundaries (Beck & Sznaider, 2006; Holliday, 2011). This paper intends to relate this understanding of complex and fluid social processes to the nature of the intercultural experience for language learners who attend primary schools. Gerd Baumann's (1996) ethnography of the London Borough of Southall, is interesting here, his references to culture are multiple and creative, dependent on who is speaking to whom and about what. Individuals who live within a community have very different identities – the population is diverse, even though they may be categorised within the notion of White British.

Ideological construction

One of the tenets of critical cosmopolitanism is the postmodern understanding that grand narratives of nation and history are ideological (Lyotard, 1979, p. xxiv). It tells us that the concept of nation state is not defined by culture and language, but by a political construct that employs exaggerated constructs of culture and language to provide it with validity. The positivist, modernist view of culture as a homogeneous whole is therefore replaced with the view that it is hybrid, shifting, imagined and ideologically constructed. There are two important things to note here. First, this critical cosmopolitan understanding represents a scientific revo-

lution from which we cannot return rather than an alternative understanding that we might choose (Kuhn, 1970). Second, thinking of cultures as essentially different homogenous blocks is an ideological position that distorts how things really are. While not all ideology might be 'ideas serving as weapons for social interests' (Berger & Luckmann,1979, p. 18), in the case of language and culture the grand narratives of nation have had a particularly negative impact because they have encouraged divisive views about people and speakerhood (Kumaravadivelu, 2012) as we explain in the next section.

Cultural prejudice

This negative impact of ideologies of nation in language education concerns cultural prejudice that moves towards neo-racism. It is driven by an obsession with national or civilisational cultures which has led to a false belief that they are the prime defining factor in linguistic and cultural difference. The reason for this comes from a combination of forces: a 'methodological nationalism' – i.e. always beginning comparative social research with national categories – resulting from the upsurge of nationalism in Europe in the 19th century (e.g. Beck & Sznaider, 2006, p. 3); the influence of behaviourism that implies that learning language means learning culture (Holliday, 2005, p. 55); and a deep-seated Orientalism and historical colonialism where the West has defined the non-West as culturally deficient (e.g. Hall, 1991; Said, 1978), which has morphed into an apparently 'well-wishing' but still deeply patronising West as steward discourse of improving the world through cultural education (Holliday, 2011, 2016a). An outcome of these forces is that 'culture' is never a neutral term; and attempting to define any group of people by means of cultural stereotypes is neo-racist, with 'culture' as a euphemism for race (e.g. Hervik, 2013; Spears, 1999).

The monolingual, monocultural fallacy

A further problematic aspect of the obsession with essentially separate and homogenous national or civilisational cultures has been the way in which they have been further simplified and exaggerated as a commercial brand in the international language textbook industry (Gray, 2010). This commodification of culture has encouraged an essentialist multiculturalism in which people are reduced to images of costumes, food, festivals, fairs, folklore and statistical facts (Kramsch, 1993; Cantle, 2012; Delanty, Wodak, & Jones, 2008; Dervin, Hahl, Härkönen, & Layne, 2015; Kubota, 2004; Kumaravadivelu, 2007, pp. 104–106). In the case of lan-

guage education, this list of images, idiomatic expressions, descriptions of cultural events and situations and very particular cultural values, lead teachers and students to believe that they define the language that they are learning (Kullman, 2013; Risager, 2018).

Teachers and students, to counter this idea, only need to think about the sociolinguistics of their own societies to know that idiomatic expression is a particularly variable aspect of language as it moves and changes within small culture scenarios and that there is a huge diversity of cultural events and situations. Looking to one's own experience in this way rather than being taken in by the recipes provided by grand narratives will be a recurring theme throughout the rest of this paper.

This simplistic matching of nation, language and culture can also encourage language teachers to frame their academic identity around very narrow interpretations of 'culture'. Language teachers in primary schools bring significant expertise – both specialist and generalist, albeit in different ways, however, without any particular background in sociology, history or cultural studies, their expertise can be quite narrow; with the result that children are given tiny slices of social life selected by writers and publishers of resources and a narrow impression of the relationship between language and culture. Cultural references within resources and teaching materials are reduced to products, fixed forever and isolated rather than in flux and mutually dependent. Misconceptions can arise (Driscoll et al, 2014) which are further exacerbated when these false images of language and culture are squeezed into the limited repertoire of classrooms.

Moving from blocks to thread

What has so far been described are the blocks to the teaching and learning of language that arise from false notions of language and culture. In contrast, re recommend a more inclusive pedagogy that employs language learning to seek out intercultural threads that bring us together. This implies a more realistic and open image of language and culture, with deeper, more worthwhile outcomes that avoid cultural prejudice. Threads are the counter to grand narratives when they connect us back to the personal experience of language and culture that we all bring with us but which we might not easily recall.

Helpful here is Holliday's grammar of culture (2018a, 2018b) which shows how blocks and threads compete within the complex nature of the intercultural and in the everyday process of small culture formation on the go (Amadasi & Holliday, 2017; Holliday, 2016b; Holliday & Amadasi, 2020). It is important to note that the use of 'grammar' here is not in the linguistic sense, but rather from

C Wright Mills' *Sociological imagination* (1970, p. 235). He claims it as the basic method for detailed sense-making of the structures of society. It is the sociological rather than linguistic analysis running through this paper that is able to bring out the cultural politics of language education. The grammar depicts three broad domains, each with negative and positive forces. The positive are threads that we can choose to use to bring us together. The negative are the blocks that keep us apart and build cultural prejudice.

The first domain, *national and other structures,* is most often associated with nation or other things that structure our lives such as education, the media, political systems, economies, institutions and perhaps religion. Within this domain, there are certainly elements that can provide us with huge resources when engaging with new languages or cultural environments. It is these resources that would enable language teachers and learners to bring a background and understanding of how language works in society to the learning of language. However, there are also blocking grand narratives that come to us through our media and politics that can demonise the Other – propaganda about other nations, and especially, these days, about migrants and minorities, or about people we are at war with, are obvious examples. In this sense, no talk of culture can ever be neutral because we are all brought up, consciously or unconsciously, to position ourselves as either superior or inferior to others. It is in this domain that we can be fed false notions that 'our' large culture and language is essentially culturally separate and different to 'theirs' – a notion that will by its nature carry an implication of inferiority or superiority and of how we need to be behaviouristically trained in the other culture in order to enter it.

The second domain, *cultural products*, mostly has positive, threading impact in that there are cultural flows that are carried across structural borders – art, literature, music, architecture, cuisine, fashion and so on. There is however a negative, blocking force in this domain in the form of discourses of culture which make essentialist statements and claim 'us / them' boundaries – 'in my culture we always … and never …'. These, and the 'us / them' grand narratives on the right of the grammar are the basis of the essentialist and neo-racist imaginations of language and culture described above.

The third domain, *underlying universal cultural processes*, is potentially the major source of threads in that they are what we all share in the way that we engage with and construct culture, wherever we are, from a very early age. It is these processes that are shared across languages. It is here that language learners can broaden their horizons by identifying with how other languages *also* make meaning, and therefore understand better how they themselves make meaning. This sharing of experience and complexity is the basis for the suggestions for threads in the rest of the paper. However, without careful teacher guidance this

continuous process of small culture formation on the go in the experience of another language can revert to the reinforcing of the blocks of distrust, suspicion and cultural prejudice as described above.

A richer picture

What therefore is the relationship between language and culture that we can work with to create threads that bring us together in a more open teaching and learning experience? Answering the question is helped by a now developing consensus within critical applied linguistics and critical sociology that the relationship between language and culture is complex and far from one where nations, their cultures and their languages map neatly into each other (Saraceni, 2015). Both language and culture are entities that can travel creatively and independently of each other. Neither can be pinned down as tradition has imagined that they can. The common notion that teaching a 'target language' matches precisely onto teaching a 'target culture' is therefore fallacious. The use of the term 'target' is itself problematic where it suggests a definable place to go to, learn and master. A language does not speak one particular culture rather it embraces a diverse range of cultural realities.

All languages are constantly changing to take in the diverse cultural flows – the carrying of cultural influences from one place to another. The notion of *linguacultural* is useful to explain the relationship between language and cultural flows. The term comes from Risager, who states that it is a cultural 'language resource' which can be carried from its language of origin to other languages. For example, 'people carry their Danish language resources with them into new cultural contexts and perhaps put them to use in new ways under new circumstances' (2011, p. 107). She continues: 'when I as a Dane move around the world, I tend to build on my Danish linguacultural, when I speak English, French or German. I therefore contribute to the flow of Danish linguacultural across languages' (p. 110). Children, of course, rarely travel without adults to support and protect them. Their encounters, should they travel, are therefore more mediated through the local or home language. At home however, young pupils travel between the home culture, school culture and other places outside of the home both with different domestic cultures and organisational cultures, in the world outside. As such, they too, carry their language resource as they move around their world.

Searching for threads

Thinking about cultural flows and how language can express a range of cultural experiences and references, one of the important thread benefits of learning another language is carrying experience from one language to another and back. Equally, learning from the home culture and carrying it over to the school culture. A new language will undoubtedly connect with cultural experience that one's own language does not, but it will be experience that one can nevertheless bring into one's own cultural domain.

Another set of threads are the specialist discourses. These are the ways of talking about things that are specific to particular activities such as football, cricket or dance or within the medical profession and most importantly for young people, with specialist curriculum discourses. These discourses are connected with small cultures and will be similar in different cultural settings. For example, Mathematics may be taught in different ways across the world but the specialist curriculum discourse is similar.

Throughout the learning process, children could be encouraged to pull threads from their personal cultural trajectories to make sense, adapt and innovate. They could be encouraged to externalise and transfer their existing knowledge of language, the curriculum and their understanding of the political and social world in other words the grand and personal narratives that surround them. Recent demonstrations about climate change and an end to the age of fossil fuel, led by school children and joined by millions of students and workers worldwide, is a case in point. Children and young people are connected globally and they are interested in subjects and topics that make meaning and make sense in terms of their lives, as they are living it and their life in the future as they see it. Gong & Holliday (2013), in their work with secondary students in China, found that students asked for less superficial 'culture specific' content in language lessons, but instead to have 'something meaningful for their lives, including stories which may give them guidance for their futures' (pp. 48–9). Baraldi & Lervese's (2017) study of 'the interactional production of narratives of children's memories during a series of workshops in Italian "multicultural" classrooms' in 'one primary school and two secondary schools in an Italian town' (p. 398) showed 'the children's epistemic authority in producing their own narratives and telling their personal experiences and views' (p. 414).

For children living in one area and going to school within the neighbourhood, the flow of 'linguaculture', from their home culture to their school culture and across the various online devices that connect them to the wider world, if nurtured within a pedagogic frame, could be of immense value to children's cultural development. Rather than emphasizing separate languages and cultures

and language learning as a separated activity, teachers have the potential to forge strong cultural threads through the curriculum. Conteh, (2012, p. 114), in an ethnographic study of bilingual children's concept of funds of knowledge, explored children's learning experiences at home, in the community and at school. She argues that schools and classrooms should 'be places where 'threads, strands and fibres of global, national and local discourses are dialectically mediated and dialogically played out in the interactions between teachers and learners.' We suggest that schools have the potential to provide learning spaces where children develop a fluid and flexible cultural literacy to understand themselves, others and the world. Rather than linguaculture being solely a useful concept for different people carrying language into new cultural contexts, it could be the impetus for children moving between cultures within their own world.

Some meta-analysis or critical reflection of the curriculum content included within the foreign language, particularly that which represents blocking grand narratives and discourses of culture, can help children question these narratives and discourses in resources and teaching materials. Arguably, in primary schools, where one class teacher teaches most or all subjects, this critique of blocking narratives could take place across the curriculum. The ability of children to critique cultural texts and find their own critical meaning through their practice of agency is illustrated by Canagarajah's (1999, pp. 88–90) iconic example of Sri Lankan secondary school children scribbling their own stories about South-Asian film heroes and heroines into the margins of their American English language textbook, out of sight of the teacher. Canagarajah later notes that these hidden expressions of creativity, often in English better than that which they display to their teachers and not recorded in institutional assessment, are essentially cosmopolitan in the way in which they relate to the wider world. They are the things that are 'relatively free from surveillance' and can also include such things as 'asides between students, passing of notes, small group interactions, peer activities, marginalia in textbooks and notebooks, transition from one teacher to another, before classes begin, after classes are officially over'. Canagarajah notes that 'students can make almost any site in the educational environment free from surveillance by colluding in constructing a culture of underlife behaviour' (2004, p. 221).

Interculturality

A further area where threads can be found is within the concept of interculturality. This term has been used in recent years to depict the quality that enables positive and creative intercultural engagement. An established definition is 'a dynamic process by which people draw on and use the resources and processes of cultures

with which they are familiar but also those they may not typically be associated with in their interactions with others' (Young & Sercombe, 2010, p. 181). Dervin (2016, pp. 103–106) says that it is a highly creative quality that requires the reflexive and uncertain work of digging beneath the surface of discourses and politics. The reflexive and creative nature of interculturality is at the core of the *underlying universal cultural processes domain* of the grammar, however, as with the other aspects of this domain, it needs to be drawn away from the essentialist idea that involves looking from one bounded national culture (e.g. English) to another (e.g. French, German or Spanish), and being satisfied with tolerance or understanding of an essentially foreign Other still within a divisive 'us / them' frame.

Learning another language provides important opportunities for a creative and searching interculturality analysis inherent in seeking to find ourselves within the cultural lives of others. This is by no means straight forward but through teaching reflectively and reflexively teachers can support this process pedagogically. In the specific case of language, it is through heightening understanding and awareness of how language works. It is an entry point into a specific language and a particular society, at the same time understanding that this is not all that either the society or the language can be. In this sense, language is part of the architecture of social life that can be expressed in other ways. The language and the society are each far bigger than the other.

There have been similar discussions about third spaces and hybridity with regard to language learning. The old, essentialist idea is to do with intermediate spaces or impure or fractured identities that are there because of problematic, often cultural boundaries between one language and another (Fairclough, 2006; Holliday, 2018b; Kumaravadivelu, 2007). Rather, if we think instead of more open and creative interpretations (Bhabha, 1994; Guilherme, 2002; Hall, 1996; Holliday, 2018a) – that all of us, everywhere, are multiple in our cultural histories and identity, then the learning and teaching of language becomes a massive opportunity for dissolving borders and exploring even further who we all are – another way of finding ourselves in others. The following extract from a primary school textbook for English in Iran, reflects this perspective:

> Turtles are patient and curious, they take their time in water and land, they never worry about where to stay or where to rest because they walk with their homes on their backs! I feel our memories are like their homes on their backs – the memories we carry to wherever we go. The Turtle in our stories travels to different places, she talks to different people, she tells us about other people's stories, that are usually my/our stories too!   (Ghahremani-Ghajar, 2009, p. 1)

This is not to argue for a global monoculture rather, a recognition that we all similar, each in our own way before we are foreign, strange or different. The point

is that when we experience new or strange cultures, we should look for and as teachers highlight the familiar. Turtles are referenced because we would always think of them being turtles first, before we consider their differences.

Methodology

A strong implication of the critical cosmopolitan approach is that the data itself can be interpreted in different ways. By simply applying the ethnographic discipline of 'making the familiar strange', empowered by the critical cosmopolitan perspective, we offer perhaps unexpected interpretations that are necessarily highly critical of all our professional practice. We identify fully with the hardworking teachers in this study and appreciate how hard it is to break away from the structures with which we all have to work. We nevertheless feel that we can all benefit from another way of looking.

The study is an interpretive study in three primary schools in coastal areas. One primary school situated on a peninsula, with a strong local identity, another on a large estate, well-known locally, regionally and nationally as an area of high deprivation with limited mobility of families and the third – a large primary academy school on the coast with limited opportunities for employment. Most pupils are of White British heritage. All the schools have an above average or well-above average proportion of disadvantaged pupils, supported by the pupil premium (additional government funding for FSM) and / or a high proportion of children with special educational needs.

Interviews with the three Headteachers provided evidence about their priorities and the place of foreign languages within the school since statutory status, the school's offer in terms of cultural development, and how foreign languages weaves through the school's cultural and international portfolio. Interviews were audio recorded and all names of people, places and schools anonymised. Ethical considerations were applied to all parts of the study. Interviews with three teachers gave a sense of how teachers incorporate cultural experiences and cultural learning within the curriculum on a daily or weekly basis. The data was scrutinised through a thematic analysis.

Findings

A recurring theme though headteacher and teacher interviews was a deep commitment for children's cultural development and the importance of developing tolerance and empathy. Staff across all three schools shared their desire to give

children cultural experiences, not only in FLs but across the whole curriculum that the children might otherwise 'miss':

> *…. There is a general desire amongst the staff to want to give the children more cultural experience… It's more of a driving force than the national curriculum. We want them to be rounded people. Some parents are against foreign cultures, you hear some children talk about foreigners so you want them to be more informed.*
> *A large section of the children here, have very limited cultural experiences in terms of the places they might go to, the people they might meet, the things they might see and so, as a staff we are aware of that, and we want to give them experiences of different art, different cultures, different music, we want to take them to the theatre.*
>
> Staff in school B

FL was perceived as part of the cultural activities that schools offered to enrich children's lives. One teacher explained, for example, that foreign languages dovetails into the school's vision and ethos about cultural education and teaching about diversity.

> *I think raising the profile of foreign languages in school … that's been part of … things that we've done around improving the cultural education … part of the package, to improve their cultural understanding and their cultural awareness.*
>
> Teacher School C

One unifying factor in all three schools was the limited experience that most children have outside of the area and how rarely (if at all) some children go to the local town or even to the water's edge. One teacher (School B) explained that there are few influences from 'outside', that some children rarely move off the estate until the school trip to the local castle or cathedral in Year 5 or 6. Some of the children have not visited the seaside despite the short distance of the coastline from their homes. The importance of a culturally rich curriculum shone through in many conversations with teachers and headteachers. In each school, teachers reported that in recent years fewer children go on holiday. Teachers and headteachers spoke about extending children's tolerance in all manner of experiences, as one headteacher recalled:

> *I sit down and have lunch with the children whenever I can and I was with the Y4 children and I said 'what would happen if a new friend in your class arrived and they were a Muslim, how would you react?' And they sort of looked at me bewildered. 'We would treat them like friends and treat them like everyone else. Why would that be different?' I thought great, just testing it out. It means we're getting this right if the children aren't bemused by that.…*   Headteacher

The headteacher from School B spoke about cultural threads and how the concept of tolerance weaves through the whole school:

> *It's complex it's not taught as a distinct thread…because it threads through every-thing. We look at partnerships locally, …comes through the incidental work…We don't want to be in a place where we all agree with one another, that's not healthy. It grows into that concept of tolerance and understanding and respect for another person's point of view, that might be different and you don't have to agree but to accept them is important.*

Two of the headteachers highlighted the importance of balancing a sense of locale pride and developing children's understanding of possibilities away from home. As on Head said:

> …We are …in a rural location…isolated. …*there are some children here that haven't been off the peninsula, apart from when we've taken them off.…* (FL) *gives them that sense of there's more to life than my little community…a better sense of self. …they feel very proud …We've also done a lot of work about the different her-itages in the school…*   Headteacher A

Dovetailing a vision of broadening children's perceptions and curiosity about the world with travel, exchanges and international experiences and helping to enrich children's sense of identity and belonging to their local cultures could create ten-sions and challenges. One headteacher explained he had wanted to create as many links, exchanges and visits as possible to help develop children's cultural experi-ences: *I'm passionate about travelling – and I want them to develop a passion too.* He explained the importance of balance between the two seemingly contradictory viewpoints. While discussing this issue, he shared an anecdote from a staff meet-ing, where he had been talking about visits and exchanges:

> *…But a turning point was at one staff meeting some of the TAs said: "What's the matter with the estate, this is cultural, we have lived here all our lives, what are you saying about our culture and the culture of the children. My parents and grandpar-ents have all lived their lives on the estate".*   Headteacher B

One of the teachers spoke about this incident and reported that staff need to take great care when speaking about broadening children's horizons, so as not to give offence, or imply that living on the estate is undesirable. She explained that the staff do not want to *'devalue'* children and that there is a need

> *… to strike a balance between celebrating … children's own culture and also widen-ing out* (children's mindsets*) to what it is to be British. .…. we have our annual cul-tural celebration day, one class do England… Scotland, Wales, Ireland. As well as*

the other countries … we had 14 other countries celebrated.… Reception class made London buses out of junk models, they made tea, and …some trifle. …

Teacher in school B

Interestingly, it is unlikely that children in Reception class in this school, who are aged 4 and 5, would have been to London to see a bus or would drink tea. Notions of national culture inherent within the curriculum arose in conversations with headteachers and teachers irrespective of the nation under discussion. That said, when celebrating the children's own local heritage in their neighbourhoods, teachers took care to consult with children, parents and grandparents. A case in point, was in School 'A' on the peninsula. The headteacher and staff across the school developed a small research project for children to find out from their parents, grandparents and great grandparents when their family had arrived on the peninsula and to gather stories about their activities and work. As children delved into the biographies of their own families over three or four generations, it became apparent that what appeared to be homogeneity on the surface, in relation to White British, in fact, veiled a multitude of difference. Staff gathered flags depicting each child's heritage from the counties and countries of their family. All flags were hung in the hall to celebrate difference, individual cultures and to show how people had settled on the peninsula from different places over generations. Any new children to the school were either connected to an existing flag or another flag was sourced to represent their heritage. The headteacher (School A) explained that the school uses the resources that they have and with few influences from 'outside', they focus on differences at home to help children reflect upon their own cultural identity. Children also researched the history of the peninsula and collectively designed a poster of art and industry of the local community including fruit picking and barges. They documented what their grandparents did in the areas and in the school.

Profile of foreign languages

In two of the schools, teachers and headteachers spoke earnestly and with deep commitment about the importance of maintaining quality FL provision and reported that they welcomed statutory status as there is *'now no choice'*. All schools, however, reported that children were no longer excluded from FL and all teachers and headteachers spoke with resentment about the pressure to offer children a pared down curriculum in order to focus on pupils' attainment in Literacy and Numeracy in comparison with other schools.

They spoke about the challenges in terms of curriculum time, finding appropriately trained staff – either specialist or generalist, and the dearth of professional development available. Supported by and driven by the leadership in the school, however, they found ways to maintain a focus on language, culture and diversity. The headteacher in School A who had been a FL teacher prior to taking on a headship role, argued that policy recognition in the national curriculum had given the subject some sustainability and enabled staff to include it despite the challenges facing their schools.:

> …not particularly high profile in the school… this school's under immense pressure for results because whilst progress is great here attainment's very low. … We've had the regional school commissioner come to visit us because of low attainment. So really it would be very easy to say we're having a bread and water diet- Maths and English morning to evening and that's the way we're going to raise standards in school but the protection afforded by the statutory status I really do value that ….
>
> Headteacher A

She continued that with 17 classes and only two staff who felt confident to teach Spanish, she had employed a specialist teacher. Provision had changed, she explained, as the specialist was on maternity leave and the class teacher model of staffing brought limitations but also benefits in terms of coherence to children's overall learning and a sense of connection of FL and associated cultural learning to other curriculum subjects taught by the class teacher.

> I think the teachers found that more challenging this year because of the level of preparation that it involved. They've gone down the 'keep it going, keep it fun' approach rather than the writing as much, so I've noticed less writing this year. There's also a Spanish club that runs at lunchtimes and they do performances-things like Little Red Riding Hood, quite simple little things and that's where we are with languages.

She went on to say that she had noticed benefits from the class teachers teaching Spanish:

> I would say the difference …is that they possibly see it …more like their other subjects …Whereas previously when the specialist used to arrive in the classroom. Although the teacher was still there it was like a special event …it has normalised it for the children. …the teachers have been able to follow up with bits more, bits and pieces throughout the week. So, I'm still in two minds about having a specialist come in to do it.

Curriculum time limitations was discussed across all schools. A teacher in School B explained:

> *The curriculum is so intensely crowded. The morning is dedicated to Maths and English. … other subjects take place …in the afternoon…, which also include assembly.…*

The headteacher in School C, was more reluctant to give curriculum time and precious school resources to subjects other than Literacy and Numeracy. Despite this however, FL was offered in all classes throughout the school and progress was tracked. Statutory status, therefore may have had some influence. He said:

> *the main challenge 'has got to be high stake testing. …if something's tested the value increases. …over the last 2 years the expectations for standards in grammar, punctuation, spelling and maths and writing has gone through the roof… So one of the limiting factors …is the necessity to ensure the children achieve well in terms of the statutory tests …if you take a subject that's quite often on the periphery, like Primary Languages they're the ones that probably get more lip service …as opposed to planned strategically …we track ..milestones every 2 years…we can see that progress…in particular the residential trip where the children are really using and exploring those skills and qualities that we're learning about. …Our key priorities this year have been about getting the children, the disadvantaged children up to that level of oracy of literacy and it's been a challenge. So there's still that tug.*

Shifts in government policy over the last decade had not helped develop the potential of primary languages as reported in government reports and other research studies. The headteacher in School C argued that:

> *there's been a huge amount of flux, … huge confusion of expectations with languages. We started with …Utilising online resources … by the county… allowing the resources to talk for those teachers who are a little anxious themselves about that delivery. …. we (then) went through a little nonsense …where there was this great drive for written language …*
>
> *(Now, in Year 1) we'll do a little counting in French, when we're doing the register, we'll answer the register in French responses so the children have that awareness of these words in ..normal conversation… 'Levez vous and asseyez-vous' instead of 'stand up' and 'sit' … KS2 we're looking at a more structured approach to delivery. We've kind of gently lost our way with Primary languages and (now) it's coming back.*

A prevailing sense of national culture

A number of teachers spoke about the '*poverty of experience and opportunities*' of children on the estates and the importance for the school to provide a rich cultural offer. Within the language lessons themselves, teachers and headteachers

spoke about how the foreign language 'culture' was shared, mainly through factual information, about food, landmarks, customs and behaviours, similar to evidence about primary languages practice reported in other studies (Cable et al., 2014; Driscoll et al, 2014). These typical tourist examples of foreign cultures were enriched through intense weeks for cultural education, cross curricular cultural experiences, where children were 'immersed' in the culture of one country and visits and exchanges. All three schools explained that they try to profit from and use all the resources at their disposal to enrich the curriculum with examples of diversity.

> They are English, predominantly white, Anglo Saxon, working class, so actually everybody around them is nearly all the same … so when we do have some cultural diversity it's interesting and fascinating...   Teacher School B

In another school, the headteacher explained that recently a few families from other countries had moved into the area and teachers had invited them to read to children with storybooks in other languages and share food and customs with children. The headteacher explained that the school:

> 'do diversity days… where parents of children from Poland, Lithuania, Romania come into the school'. … (Supported by the class teachers, the parents) 'teach some of their words …. (and) Songs, …giving them the food, teaching them the games… and children are very open to this'.   Headteacher A

In School 'B', children spend time researching political, social, geographical and historical facts and stories from the internet and school library about a country to present to children in other classes. A teacher explained:

> … (children) go round the class and visit a country and learn some words.'

Connecting cultural threads across the curriculum

In two schools, staff organised the curriculum in subject groups where cultural learning was highlighted. One school taught humanity subjects together. The headteacher explained:

> we look at the links … quite often one puts humanities together. We look at the core qualities within those subjects … history uses reasoning skills, that probably matches the reasoning skills that one would look at in science. So we've got an enquiry hub. Our cultural hub … we look at … …geographical understanding and other cultures, …and we felt that matched very well and with Primary languages because that has such a drive in terms of the cultural understanding. So, we group leaders.… review

subjects with those core principles in mind, to support one another, to assess one another, to look at how we can develop the progression throughout the school. So it gives the subject leader some support in working with others in bouncing ideas off other staff.   Headteacher School C

In another school, cultural development is monitored by the cultural team who are responsible for cultural learning in Art, Music, French, Design and Technology, Religious Education, History and Geography. The teams meet twice a term to plan. How teachers conceptualize 'culture' is critical and dependent on their own experience and expertise. For example, one teacher explained, when connecting history and languages:

> (We did) *World War One and the trenches and …some culture around France and Belgium.*

Arguably, topics other than world wars are conducive to cultivating intercultural understanding. One teacher explained that when speaking about the French, a child in her class said *'they were with us in the war'.* She went on to say:

> *you have to define culture for children'… 'they all draw the same …castle, or London bus … they don't all go further than the edge of the estate as some don't have access to cars.*

One of the schools reported that they explore emotional as well as cultural issues through language learning. Recently, a teacher explained they have used a book called 'The Colour Monster' written by Anna Llenas in Spanish. There are different types of emotions represented. For the emotion of 'anger', the teacher read the book in Spanish:

> *… we talked about what w   it would feel like if you were in another country and you did not know the language. What could you use to work it out, would you use the pictures/words you would recognise because they are similar to English? Then we read the English version. But actually they could pretty much translate it from the pictures….*

At the time of the interview the school used three languages to speak about 'anger' in different classes: French in Years 1 and 2; Italian for Years 3 and 4; and Spanish in Years 5 and 6.

Global issues

Schools combined intercultural and cultural awareness with raising awareness about global issues. Hunt's work (2012) about global learning in schools indicate that global learning helped children to be more aware both socially and culturally and as such, broadened learners' horizons. One headteacher explained how technology helps to meet the aims of cultural and global learning.

> We've joined up with a global learning partnership, one of the British Council outreach ones... online resources but just generally the access on the internet now means if you want to know 'what birthday celebrations in Guatemala are like' you can find something now that transports the children there and they're able to do that.

Teachers spoke highly of all manner of technological devices to enhance cultural learning, not only with specific commercial resources for teaching languages but also from children's own experiences. One headteacher explained that children are encouraged to make webcams of their travels, when visiting relatives or going on holiday, thereby increasing children's agency and enhancing the link between children's experiences away from school and within school. Another headteacher spoke about the use of online resources and films and videos to being alive cultural diversity such as Christmas or Easter celebrations. One school had invested in Google Expeditions with virtual reality headsets. They explained:

> So you could walk into a Chinese classroom, a rain forest...phenomenal!...We can't take the children there, we can be ... immersive ...using technology...

Global citizenship and cultural or intercultural awareness is also evident in the inspection framework for schools. Ofsted, evaluate the quality and overall effectiveness of cultural development in schools, particularly those schools that are not performing at the expected level in comparison with national average attainment scores.

The headteachers all agreed that opportunities for international, regional and even local visits had diminished because of limited funding and increased prices for travel and accommodation thereby reducing children's opportunities to experience difference and widen their perspectives. The importance of technology was therefore increasing. One teacher also thought that a sense of stranger-fear had increased, causing more parents to be reluctant about their children travelling abroad or away from home without them. One school managed to maintain a French residential trip, despite these challenges. The headteacher explained:

The 3-day residential to France they experience a whole host of French culture and a little bit of language too. But the language isn't the focus. When they're away we make sure there's a culturally rich activity week for the children who go and those that don't go on that trip.

One teacher explained that international work particularly with the Erasmus project has had a major influence in the school. She said:

this Erasmus project … is about changing the whole school's way of dealing with what could be a problem and twisting it on its head and turning it into an advantage so that we are now proud of having these children in our school and their families and we see them as a resource to develop our whole school cultural awareness rather than "Oh dear, we have a Polish child who cannot speak English", now we think differently "Oh good, we can learn some of the child's home language", we can have displays and the teachers can have a cultural celebration … a real mind-set change.

British values

The legal requirement that Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural (SMSC) development should be subjected to official inspection and be part of the School Inspection remit (Ofsted) has augmented the interest, status and importance of personal development and values and school's effectiveness in delivering a quality education. In relation to cultural development, pupils need to be able to demonstrate that they understand and appreciate cultural influences that have shaped their own heritage and those of others, that they show respect for, accept and understand diversity as shown by their tolerance and attitudes, they're willing to participate in activities as well as knowledge of the British parliamentary system (Ofsted, 2017).

In conversation with headteachers and teachers, 'Britishness' and British Values were mentioned when speaking about cultural development. Education and the curriculum have always been a cradle for notions of national identity but until now, it has not been externally assessed against a four-point scale criteria of: 'outstanding, good, requires improvement or inadequate'. SMSC have also become part of teacher professionalism as they are included in the national Teachers Standards (DfE, 2012). Promoting British values, therefore, as determined by the government, influences how teachers frame culture and give boundaries to what is British and what is not – what is culturally acceptable and what is strange or foreign. One teacher directed the conversation to display boards and posters around the school to help children to identify the acceptable tenets of British values:

> *We have the new British values, we have the display boards around …If you ask some children what British values are, they may not be able to reel them off per se … but the focus is on British as opposed to be European or just a citizen of the world…*   Teacher School B

Headteacher of School A explained:

> *We just gave over the week to looking at British Values as obviously it's something that came into the curriculum and we felt we had to get a handle on it quickly. So we linked them to our school values and each class worked on the different values and created some sort of artistic or theatrical outcome …it wasn't about writing …it was about their emotional engagement and how they felt they could show that. So we had people doing hand prints for community, a quilt that you'll see in the entrance that our older children made looking at all the different values. I did a series of assemblies leading up to that with a different value in each assembly.*

Headteacher in School C said:

> *…you see so many schools that profess to do British values and when you look at what's going on underneath the surface … (they) say we've got our values on display… And with regards to the role that primary languages can play in that it's that cultural acceptance that we are part of a global community and that we can learn a language and that it's important that we can learn a language to demonstrate that we're not waiting for others to speak English that we're trying to meet other cultures part way. I think culturally that's very important that – in particular, which isn't a very diverse community, we have to work harder at that, because maybe some of the children are of families that have a very insular view of diversity… It's not that poster on the wall.*

Conclusion

This paper explores foreign languages (FL) and associated intercultural development in diverse primary school settings in England. In all three schools, cultural learning was holistic, cross curricular and embedded both through the values of the school and through a more hard-line assessment regime for external stakeholders. Tolerance and empathy threaded through much of the interviews with teachers and headteachers. The paper, however, argues that contradictions exist in the cultural offer provided: on the one hand teachers spoke of their deep commitment to broadening children's horizons and developing threads through the curriculum about the world and global issues to ensure that children look beyond the local, regional and national. And on the other hand, some discussions reveal that the essentialist national frame for foreign languages that reaffirms differences

and the us-and-them narrative prevails. Teachers and headteachers are sensitive to local culture and work with children and their families to develop cultural links and threads between home and school thereby developing small cultures on-the-go but 'traditional' grand narratives about teaching about food, folklore and festivals appear normal and unchallenged. Teachers, of course, do not work within a vacuum. Technology is helping to bring 'real' cultural experiences into the classroom and teachers are keen to use new resources but funding and time are extremely limited. Teachers learn new strategies and approaches through initial and continuous development, but opportunities for development are also limited. Primary languages has the potential to lead the way and challenge the false essentialist assumptions that learners need or want a tourist impression of a country. Rather, young learners' construction of culture is formed and influenced by their experiences at home, at school – through the curriculum, and in the world outside. Their schools are providing more topics that have meaning to their lives and their developing cultural identity and it is time that foreign languages contributed more fully to the discourse.

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