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Constructing inclusive education in a neo-liberal context: promoting inclusion of Arab-Australian students in an Australian context

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School systems are a major social change agent capable of challenging social inequalities and economic disadvantages. Yet, while schools in Australia are being confronted with increasingly culturally diverse populations as well as an increasing focus on student retention, this transformative role is increasingly being played out in a broader educational context that has been found to replicate rather than challenge patterns of social inequality. Successive governments in Australia have responded to this context with a raft of policy initiatives. This paper, based on three-year longitudinal research undertaken in the city of Melbourne, outlines this policy context and introduces the theoretical approach that underpins its innovative approach to managing cultural diversity in educational institutions. It argues for, and presents, a multidimensional model for managing cultural diversity in schools, one that provides the tools for transformative practices to be undertaken to effect positive change in school environments for the benefit of all students.

Introduction

A distinguishing feature of contemporary political life is thus the insistence that only if those differences which are constitutive of identity—whether differences of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, culture, language and so on—are given full acknowledgement and respect, not merely in law but in a society's basic institutions, can equal participation for all citizens in a democracy be realised. The most basic social institution of all in this regard is of course a society's public education system, since it is through education that identity, whether individual or societal, is reflected—validated or discounted—and reconstructed for the future. (Jonathan, 2000, pp. 377–378)

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Multicultural education has been defined as ‘an approach to teaching and learning that is based upon democratic values and beliefs and that affirms cultural pluralism within culturally diverse societies in an interdependent world’ (Bennett, 2003, p. 14). There is broad agreement on the objective of multicultural education: ‘it relates to the quality of living in an ethnically and culturally diverse society’ (Leeman, 2003, p. 32).

Although now commonly recognised in education policy discourse of culturally pluralist nations, education practice has often been based on an assumption that a non-mainstream background is an educational liability (Campbell, 2000). In Australia throughout the 1990s the key change in education was the growth in competition at every level: between students; between teachers; between schools and types of schools; and between school districts (Marginson, 2006, p. 209). This curtailed the ability of schools to cooperate in meeting the needs of diverse groups of students given a shift in focus from student need to student performance (Apple, 2001). Devolved governance based on competitive positioning, parental choice and *per capita* funding created both opportunities and tensions for schools in the context of increased inter-racial tension post-9/11.

In this paper we draw on research funded by the Australian Research Council Linkage Project and conducted from 2003–2006 with three Melbourne secondary schools characterised by high levels of cultural diversity and social disadvantage. Other project partners included a community service agency, Victorian Arabic Social Services and the Scanlon Foundation, a philanthropic trust with an interest in cultural diversity and social cohesion. The project, entitled ‘Diversity: an educational advantage’, had a number of aims: to develop a multi-tiered best practice model that encouraged school communities to better manage their cultural and linguistic diversity; to provide teacher and school support resources and professional development; to build strong partnerships between schools and local communities to promote positive relationships and a more inclusive school environment; and to inform and influence the further development of multicultural education policy and practice. These aims were pursued through three approaches: the work of an in-school cultural diversity facilitator; the development of print and on-line resources for teachers and other school staff; and research to inform the development and assess the impact of the other project components.

The research focus was Arab-Australians, a group marked by diversity of religion, nationality, gender, class and, most notably, language. Immigration from the Arabic-speaking countries constituted 8% of the total migration to Australia in 2001, with the population of the various Arabic-speaking communities quadrupling in size between 1976 and 2001 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001). In 2006, 204,700 people spoke Arabic at home, making it the fourth largest language group other than English in Australia and representing a 37% increase over a decade (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). In the schools participating in this study, up to 80% of the student population came from non-English-speaking backgrounds, with the largest language group being Arabic (Victorian Office of Multicultural Affairs, 2003). Data were collected from Arabic and non-Arabic students ($n = 264$),

teachers ($n = 117$) and Arabic parents ($n = 78$), through surveys, focus groups and interviews and were analysed both longitudinally and comparatively.

The paper proceeds with a discussion of multicultural education and related policy. The theoretical perspective underlying the project is then introduced and the research findings presented. Finally, the paper outlines the resources that have been developed in pursuit of the aim of promoting cultural diversity as an educational advantage.

Multicultural education in context

Multicultural education, both in Australia and internationally, has often resulted in remedial interventions aimed at ethnic groups. Yet the ability to successfully live and interact in a globalized, interdependent world is increasingly being seen as a fundamental component of the education of all students. Thus, references to 'multicultural education' relate to activities on two dimensions: firstly, the educational work of enabling all students to prepare themselves to live in a multicultural world and, secondly, optimising educational opportunities and outcomes for students thereby allowing democratic participation regardless of cultural background (Leeman, 2003).

In Australia, official support for multicultural education has centred on the aims of encouraging civic duty, cultural respect, equity and productive diversity for all Australian students. This intent is clearly outlined in *The Adelaide declaration on national goals for schooling in the twenty-first century*, an 'historic' commitment by all Australian governments that, in addition to outlining the talents and capacities, knowledge and skills that all Australian students should acquire, also outlined a commitment to socially just schooling where:

all students understand and acknowledge the value of cultural and linguistic diversity and possess the knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to, and benefit from, such diversity in the Australian community and internationally. (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 1999, n.p.)

However, such official support for multicultural education 'mask(s) an uneasy ambivalence' towards multiculturalism and multicultural education by elites within the Anglo-Celtic 'core' of Australia (Hickling-Hudson, 2002, p. 3). In an effort to maintain an ideal of social order and cohesion, systemic disadvantages can go unchallenged within superficial forms of multicultural education that acknowledge diversity on a purely ethnic level (Troyna, 1993). An example of this is occasional activities such as Harmony Day, an Australian government initiative that encourages all Australians to contribute to and build upon Australia's social cohesion through the promotion of Australian values including understanding, tolerance and inclusion. Even though initiatives such as Harmony Day represent unquestionably positive initiatives that are conducive to social cohesion, they are examples of multicultural education as a 'superficial "celebration of difference" through "foods and festivals" activities rather than an examination of how "difference" serves to advantage some and disadvantage others' (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005, p. 16–17).

While cultural groups are granted the right to maintain their traditional values, languages and social practices, a lack of equity in educational outcomes is often attributed to students and their families through reference to their 'different' and 'disadvantaged' cultural and language background. Such explanations risk cultural stereotyping, selecting culture as the key variable in academic achievement while failing to acknowledge difference between and within cultural groups, difference in outcome due to instructional practices (Rousseau & Tate, 2003) as well as failing to recognise the potential for students and schools to use their cultural hybridity as an educational advantage for the individual and as a competitive advantage for the school (Campbell, 2000). In contrast, culturally responsive schools are guided by the notion that diversity is an asset (Johnson, 2003).

For schools working with high levels of Arab-Australian students, this process has been rendered more complex given the increasing social marginality that Arab and Muslim communities in Australia have faced over the past decade. This social marginality is partly reflected in more pronounced processes of exclusion and racialized discourses towards Arab-Australians in the wake of 9/11 and the so-called War on Terror. There is now a significant body of work that explores the impact of this environment upon Arab-Australian communities in general and young Arab-Australians' experience of social and cultural marginalization in particular (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2004; Poynting & Ang, 2004; Poynting *et al.*, 2004; White, 2004; Mansouri, 2005; Mansouri & Kamp, 2007).

The Victorian policy context

The Victorian government's policy documents note that the school system is a major agent for social change with an important role to play in the development of attitudes, values and critical thinking and in confronting barriers to social participation (Department of Education & Training, 1997). Yet while being confronted with increasingly culturally diverse populations this role is played out in a broader educational context that has replicated existing patterns of social inequality (Teese & Polesel, 2003). The Victorian government has responded to this tension through a range of policy initiatives. Policy documents include the *Multicultural policy for Victorian schools* (Department of Education & Training, 1997) and *Guidelines for managing cultural and linguistic diversity in schools* (Department of Education, Employment & Training 2001). These documents required schools to build an accepting environment where all staff and students are treated with dignity and respect and where diversity was valued:

Diversity brings significant educational benefits to all students, teachers and administrators and the wider community. (Department of Education, Employment & Training, 2001, p. 2)

On 1 January, 2005, the Multicultural Victoria Act (Parliament of Victoria, 2004) came into effect enshrining principles of access, participation and contribution for all Victorian citizens, to services made available by the Victorian government. The

Multicultural Victoria Act specified responsibilities for school councils, principals, staff and students.

Contemporaneously, in Victoria, and to some extent in all Australian states, there has been an increase in 'retentionphilic' (Henry & Grundy, 2004) policies typically flowing from arguments around the need to equip Australia's workforce with higher levels of knowledge and skills thereby responding to the economic challenges of the globalized context. This has included an increasing emphasis laid on the importance of young people completing the final years of secondary school, or an alternative educational equivalent, in preparation for the continuing study that will be necessary to enter and remain effective in a labour market influenced by the forces of globalization. In Victoria, this focus has been actioned through the development of targets to increase school retention, an increase in the school leaving age to 16 and the development of an additional vocationally-based senior school qualification. As a result of these policies, school retention has increased, with the consequence that increasingly culturally-diverse groups are remaining at schools for longer periods of time. Yet, for a range of reasons, schools have been slow to respond to the learning needs of this much more diverse population (Henry & Grundy, 2004).

Clearly, there is no lack of policy recognition of the need to construct inclusive education on the basis of social justice as well as the recognition of Australia's place within a wider, globalized context. However, in common with the European situation, notwithstanding policy developments, school systems are often uncertain how to address diversity in practice (Johnson, 2003). In Victoria, this has been aggravated by ongoing Departmental restructuring, an increase in curricular innovation and accountability and limited resources for professional development. These factors lead to a context where schools are compelled to work more effectively with, and seek the support of and knowledge within, their local communities. In responding to this context, the project explored the possibilities for a whole-of-school approach to develop the capacity of students, teachers and the community to respond to the educational and social needs of Arab-Australian youth in post 9/11 Australia.

Theoretical perspective

The theoretical approach underpinning this study is Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Delgado & Stefancic, 2003) which is 'committed to social justice as a general principle, [and] particularly acknowledges the pervasiveness of race and racism in the ongoing experiences of students of colour and in the structures and practices of educational institutions' (McDonald, 2003, p. 2). From its seeds in the legal scholarship movement in the USA, CRT was introduced in education in 1994 (Ladson-Billings, 2005). Critical Race Theory's aim for education is to challenge conventional accounts of schools and the processes that occur within them by examining the role of race and racism (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005).

One of the central tenets of CRT is to draw in the personal and community experiences of non-mainstream students, valuing their knowledge in recognition that

'those who have experienced discrimination speak with a special voice to which we should listen' (Masuda, 1995 cited Dixon & Rousseau, 2005, p. 10). Personal stories of not only students but also parents and teachers are powerful tools in inclusive education, allowing a challenge to the stories of the dominant group (Delgado & Stefancic, 2003) and the taken-for-granted arrangements that exist in schools as well as 'piercing walls of hostility' in the current global context (Luwish, 2001; Elbaz-Luwish, 2005).

It is noted that, despite its name, CRT is not so much a theory as a perspective, a 'set of interrelated beliefs about the significance of race/racism and how it operates' (Gillborn, 2006, p. 19). Given the complex and changing character of race and racism in contemporary times there has been a reluctance to identify firm theoretical tenets (Gillborn, 2006, p. 24). In what is cited by Stovall (2006, p. 244) as the most explicit definition of its operation in education, Ladson-Billings (1998) suggests five tenets of CRT. These are to: name and discuss the pervasive, daily reality of racism; expose and deconstruct policies that are seemingly 'race neutral' yet entrench disadvantage; promote the voices and narratives of people of colour as sources of critique; revisit liberalism to address its inability to dismantle discriminatory practices; and, finally, to change and improve race-neutral and multicultural movements in education that reinforce what, in the Australian context, is an Anglo-Celtic 'norm'.

Of these tenets, the third, a concern with voice, is often pivotal. Critical Race Theory proponents do not suggest that there is one 'voice' that speaks for all but rather that there is a shared experience of discrimination that structures the stories that can be told (Dixon & Rousseau, 2005). As such, the concern in education is not to simply report student stories but rather to create the potential for analysis of the schooling conditions of students (Duncan, 2002), the 'business-as-usual forms of racism' (Delgado & Stefancic, 2003, p. xvi) that are ingrained in social structures such as schools. With this perspective in mind, a limited overview of the research findings is now presented.

Research findings

Our research indicated that the Arabic-background students did have different 'schooling conditions' than other students. They had fewer positive experiences regarding teacher-student relations and perceived racial tension in the school:

Well, I don't know, like after 9/11, you know what happened in America, they all used to say to me 'she's got a bomb in her pencil case', 'she's going to bomb the school', just 'cause I was a Muslim. (female student)

They were more likely than students from other backgrounds to express distrust towards their teachers and this was particularly located in a perceived lack of cultural understanding. In contrast, teachers with cultural understanding were highly valued:

They've been there and they've done all types of stuff that I've done, right? And they've got an understanding, you know? They...give you the time and a place to talk to you and

that whereas teachers that have gone to university, been straight all their lives and that, I don't know. They know all their school stuff but they don't know how to talk to or relate to people about what they're describing. (male student)

Arabic students were concerned about the 'perceived' increase in racism against Arabic and Muslim communities in Australia, associated with global and local events. They argued that global political events had changed the way Arab-Australians are perceived and treated by the community:

Most Australians treat us Lebanese people very well but after the tragedy happened at the World Trade Centre, the bombing, it's changed them a bit. Like for instance ladies that wear the veil get comments at shopping centres and in public and some girls that I know were spat at in the streets and they were treated very badly. (female student)

The students discussed the conflation of Arab and Muslim communities into a singular homogeneous category, constructed as synonymous with threat and terrorism and often identified through visual markers of difference. The boys felt that the media vilified and misrepresented their culture. The perceived 'criminalization' of Arab and Muslim identity in Australia was also a common theme in students' discussions. The girls discussed particular instances of racism, especially relating to wearing the *hijab*:

[Do you experience racism at school...?] Not with me, 'cause they can't tell that I'm Muslim because I'm not wearing the scarf but when I'm with my sister, she wears the scarf, like there was a time when she got um, like someone said something to her, like 'you're a Muslim slut' or something. And then that turned into a fight. Like when I'm alone, no-one will say anything to me 'cause they don't know what religion I am or anything, but when I'm with my sister there is racism. (female student)

Many of the female students were particularly concerned about negative attitudes towards girls and women who could be immediately identified with Islam. Thus, students were able to narrate abstract processes of racialization and relate these to personal experiences of racism.

While many students in this study did feel positive about their social interactions with other students of all backgrounds, the research findings suggest a significant level of disengagement with the schools as learning institutions. Students frequently attributed their own disengagement from school and the processes of learning to perceptions of teacher disinterest in them as individuals of diverse backgrounds to perceptions of teacher racism and to low teacher expectations of their educational achievements:

The reality is that a lot of the Asian kids coming out now are fee-payers. They see it as a punishment. They're not necessarily academic. The notion of the high achieving, academic Asian is becoming unstuck in the teachers' mind. Some teachers still have those expectations. Some of the Iraqi kids do have severely interrupted backgrounds so they don't do well at school. Others don't. So it can be a generalisation. (teacher)

Data collected from teachers support this assertion. Only 8% of teachers perceived curriculum constraints as a key challenge in working in a culturally diverse setting, with 33% responding that student indifference was the key challenge. A large percentage of teachers (59%) thought both parents and the community represented the key

obstacles to more successful outcomes. Yet in part this reflects that Arab-Australian parents can be either illiterate and/or unfamiliar with the educational system in Australia:

Our experience with the Australian education system is very exciting to us. This education system is totally different than what we are used to in all the Arabic countries, therefore we find difficulties in accepting it without understanding its qualities and properties.
(Arabic-speaking-background parent)

The data reinforced long-standing arguments that even if the taught curriculum is reformed to reflect multicultural education dimensions, unless the ‘deep structure’ of schooling is also transformed, traditional unjust social structures will be perpetuated and ensure continuance of barriers to equitable learning for all students (Banks, 1997). It also supported research that argued for skills and resources to aid teachers in ‘race reflection’ (Milner, 2003; Santoro & Allard, 2005) as well as the identification of ‘diversity-related burnout’—the negative impact of daily coping with culturally diverse student groups (Tatar & Horenczyk, 2003). Accordingly, the focus of this project has been to develop a multi-dimensional model of multicultural education that addresses four key dimensions: parents, policy, practice and professional development for teachers.

Working with parents

The project’s work with parents involves a cultural diversity facilitator (CDF) who works on the ground with the participating schools to foster parent and community involvement. The CDF, in collaboration with the researchers, has worked with participating schools to instigate parent networks and to ascertain the key areas of concern within each school. This work has resulted in a series of eight parent modules that have been developed specifically to target community-school problems and to encourage parental involvement. Some of the themes explored in these modules include familiarity with the Australian educational system; understanding the role of extra-curricular activities; reading and understanding school reports and engaging productively with the school’s key structures.

The work of the CDF with parents in providing information regarding how a school goes about its work in the context of the Australian education system provides the entry point from which to move toward involvement in school governance and decision-making. However, such efforts must sit within a multi-dimensional approach that also involves the school in learning to adjust in ways that will enable it to better work with its community. The parent modules are designed to ensure that parents have avenues to become more involved in school life and that teachers and non-Arabic students have avenues to be more understanding and respectful of diverse cultures. To this end, the CDF contributes to the expansion of extra-curricular activities that include: the development of discussion groups within and across ethnic groups; workshops and forums involving community members; encouragement of student leadership and initiative; and creative outlets for students to develop and express a sense of identity.

Working with school policy

The policy focus involves the development of a Model of Best Practice that has a focus on whole-of-school change. In order for this to happen, schools need to work on a range of dimensions including their philosophy and structures; leadership and attitudes; resources and facilities; and partnerships and relationships. The Model guides schools by providing a series of resources that derive from the research findings. It includes a cultural diversity audit that schools can use to assess their standing on the range of dimensions that are considered to be necessary for an holistic approach. If the entire school is engaged in a process of collaborative transformation, then students are likely to find such changes meaningful, rich and consistent; and teachers are likely to have the opportunity and confidence to build their skills, knowledge and awareness in working in culturally diverse settings. The Model recognizes the skills and capacities students bring to a transformative educational dialogue and the contribution parents and community can make as a source of essential knowledge about a student's learning behaviours in the classroom. Importantly, it works from the basis that transformative multicultural education is of benefit to all involved in the educational process, not just Arab and other minority students.

Teacher practice

The practice dimension has been pursued through the development of a fully interactive website (<http://www.teachingdiversity.org.au/preview/>) for teacher use—the Teacher Support Materials (TSM). The TSM provides themed avenues through which teachers can pursue two objectives. The first involves them in individual professional development as they explore project data and theoretical material as well as working through reflective exercises. The second objective is to assist with the provision of classroom resources: each theme includes not only video and text voices but also a resource section, which provides links to wide-ranging resources for use in the classroom. Three groups of voices drawn from the research data are included: students, parents and teachers of students from a variety of national, ethnic and religious groups. Teachers' involvement with the TSM is further supported by a printed Teacher Workbook that includes a series of resources specifically designed for the project and linked to curriculum frameworks.

Professional development

Finally, the project includes a pedagogical dimension that involves professional development for school staff. In Australia now, there is commonly a focus on inclusive education in pre-service teacher training. However, established teachers may not have experienced this in their pre-service training. As such, the onus falls on schools to ensure all staff have opportunities to develop the essential knowledge, skills and awareness for multicultural education. This is even more the case given the limited opportunities available to release teachers and other school staff for in-service

training. As such, professional development has occurred at a number of levels: through reflective work in the research process; through the development, testing and use of the TSM; and, finally, by a process of formal professional development where schools have been brought together to work collaboratively in enhancing their intercultural skills. This opportunity integrates learning about the policy context, provision of theory, exploration of the research findings, self-reflective work and the development of intercultural skills for the classroom using the TSM as one resource.

Conclusion

Whilst discussing the role of education in challenging social and economic inequities is not something new, what the project reported in this paper has attempted to do is to locate this endeavour in the context of Arab and Muslim Australian youth in post-9/11 Australia. The approach adopted for the 'Diversity: An Educational Advantage' project is inspired by the tenets of CRT. This approach not only recognises social inequalities and economic disadvantages but, more importantly, posits a framework for challenging these at the structural, ideological and discursive levels. The multicultural model adopted and implemented in this project has resulted in measurable positive attitudinal change among those surveyed (Mansouri & Percival-Wood, 2008).

The 'Diversity: An Educational Advantage' project rests on a belief that the fundamental purpose of education is to ensure that all students benefit from learning in ways that facilitate their full participation in the economy and in the broader community. In the current context young people will play an increasingly crucial role in the labour market of the future given the demographic squeeze caused by the retirement of Australia's 'baby boomer' generation. Enabling all young people, regardless of their cultural background, an equal opportunity to attain a sustainable skills base and contribute to the future of the Australian economy has been, and will continue to be, a policy priority, regardless of softening of neoliberal discourse under the newly-elected Rudd government.

While schools can and do reproduce social inequalities, they also have the potential to act as a force for social inclusion. This research has indicated the need for schools and educators to be equipped with the necessary resources and experience not only to challenge the disadvantages confronting students and their families who are newly-arrived and are struggling to work within an unfamiliar Australian education system but also to challenge racism within multicultural school settings. In this way, cultural diversity becomes an educational advantage that can benefit all students moving towards full participation in a globalized world.

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