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Cultural Diversity as an Educational Advantage

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Abstract

This paper is based on a longitudinal project that looked into the management of cultural diversity in secondary schools. It discusses how Arab-Australian students and their families understand and construct their own social and educational experiences in relation to wider social discourses. The paper outlines key pedagogical initiatives and community-school partnership initiatives that have been collaboratively developed to effect positive change in the multifaceted schooling experience.

Introduction

Following extensive preliminary consultations and wide literature reviews, this longitudinal study[1] (commended in 2003) identified two intersecting socio-educational trends necessitating further examination. One apparent trend in Australia is at the policy/funding level, with some schools falling short of meeting the educational needs of increasingly diverse student populations, inhibited by diminishing resources and mono-cultural curricula. The other trend is at the social level and relates to the increasing social marginality that Arab and Muslim communities in Australia are facing in the current political environment. This social marginality is partly reflected in the more pronounced racialised discourse towards Muslim and Arab Australians.

Cultural diversity in education discussed in the literature under the broad umbrella of multicultural education research, provides an educational framework that is relevant and responsive to all students keeping in mind their varied experiences, knowledge and backgrounds. In endeavoring to cater for the needs of students from culturally diverse backgrounds, multicultural education uses cultural diversity as a positive, rather than negative, learning resource. This is to develop in all students the skills, knowledge, values and attitudes to participate actively and with a critical informed framework as a member of society in local, national, regional and global contexts.

Within multicultural education research (e.g., Anderson 1983; Banks 2001, 1997; Bennett 2003; Bell 1997), the concept of 'cultural responsiveness' implies that schools become far more flexible in their pedagogical, curricular and structural approaches to education, in order to effectively respond to the needs of increasingly diverse student populations. It is a concept that attempts to bridge the gap between multicultural educational policies and theories on the one hand, and pluralistic educational practice on the other, with particular reference to the specific needs of the school community in question. 'Cultural Responsiveness' is underpinned by the principle "that diverse ways of understanding and interpreting the world are an asset and a resource, not a liability, and that it is in the best interest of all learners to build on the strengths and experiences that children collectively bring to the classroom" (Johnson, 2003:24).

Multicultural Education Policies in Australia

In Australia, official support for multicultural education has centered on the aims of encouraging civic duty, cultural respect, equity and productive diversity for all students. However, official support for multiculturalism does not always translate into practical and financial support for schools directly involved in the implementation of multicultural policies. 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: 3).

Victoria

How does Victorian education policy fare in this context? The state's policy argues that the school system is a major social change agent 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 (Mansouri 2005; Mansouri & Trembath 2005) this role is played out in a broader educational context that has been found to replicate rather than challenge patterns of social inequality (Teese & Polesel, 2003). The Victorian government has responded to these challenges through a range of policy initiatives, which build beyond the *Multicultural Policy for Victorian Schools* (1997) and the *Guidelines for Managing Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in Schools* (2001) to include the *Blueprint for Government Schools* (2003), the *Victorian Curriculum Reform Project* (2004) and the introduction of *Victorian Essential Learning Standards* (VELS) in 2005. All of these policies suggest implications and opportunities for Victorian schools and their communities.

The *Multicultural Policy for Victorian Schools* (1997) outlines a number of criteria and aims for schools which need to develop an in-depth knowledge and awareness of the concept of culture; an understanding of the multicultural nature of Australia's past and present history, and of the interdependence of cultures in the development of the nation. Schools must also develop skills and understandings to interact comfortably and competently in intercultural settings. For example, schools are encouraged to promote an awareness of the reality of the global village and national interdependence in the areas of trade, finance, labour, politics and communications, For this to be achieved, the development of international understanding and cooperation is essential.

The *Guidelines for Managing Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in Schools* (2001) outlined its commitment to assisting all students and staff to become informed, productive, adaptable, motivated and creative citizens, who take full advantage of their economic, social and individual opportunities. It also requires schools to build an accepting environment where all staff and students are treated with dignity and respect and where diversity is valued thereby creating a learning environment where stereotypes are questioned. Furthermore, instances of bias, bigotry, ethnocentrism, prejudice or racism are wholeheartedly rejected.

The *Blueprint for Government Schools* (2003) made recommendations for the identification and development of Essential Learnings. The Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority's (VCAA) *Victorian Curriculum Reform Project* (2004) responded to this recommendation. The VCAA's new curriculum standards—the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS), have augmented the framework for Victorian government schools' curriculum. In addition, on 1 January 2005, the Multicultural Victoria Act (2004) came into effect enshrining principles of access, participation and contribution, for all Victorian citizens, to services made available by the Victorian Government.
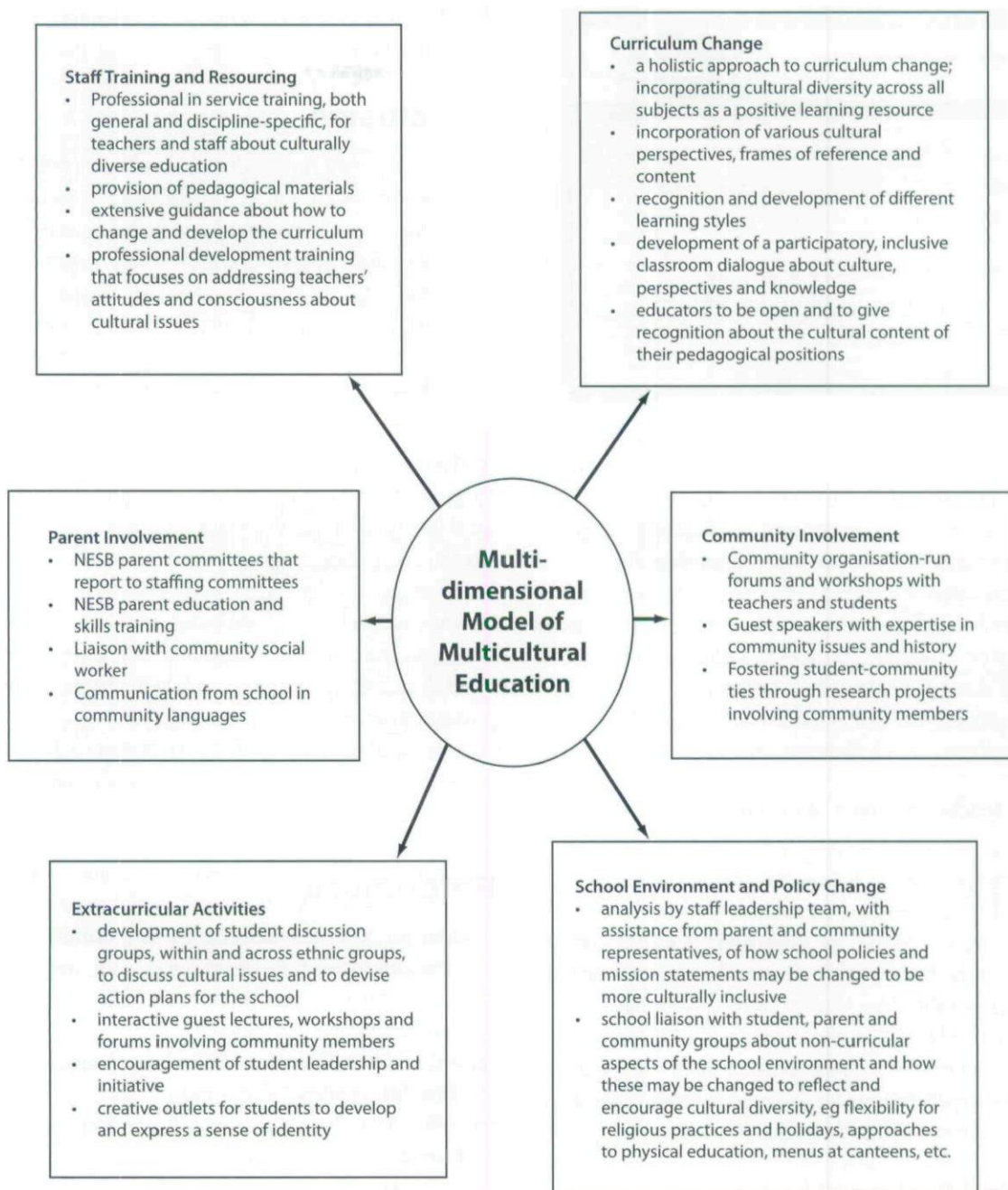
The Multicultural Victoria Act has a number of important implications for school councils, principals, staff and students. It is recommended that school councils become committed to ensuring that the contents of any existing policy document including the Accountability and Improvement Framework, and particularly the school profile, codes of practice and the student code of conduct reflect the principles of multiculturalism. They must also promote and preserve diversity and cultural heritage among members of the school community, ensuring all members of the school community are equally entitled to access opportunities and are able to participate in and contribute to the social, cultural, economic and political life of Victoria. It is the role of the school council to encourage and facilitate the participation by all parents in school community activities and decision making, taking into account the principles of multiculturalism.

The Act also has implications for school staff who are committed to promoting and affirming diversity in all aspects of their work practices and interactions with students, parents, other staff. School staff are given the responsibility of ensuring curriculum programs and classroom materials incorporate multicultural perspectives and reflect a range of cultural experiences as well as using teaching and assessment strategies that cater for a range of learning styles. They also have a role in monitoring the school environment in terms of promoting and preserving diversity and assisting the school's efforts to incorporate the principles of multiculturalism.

This Study's Approach

Current literature on cultural diversity in education suggests that there are numerous factors that contribute to successful multicultural education practices. These factors extend from individual staff practices, school-based curriculum, practices, pedagogy and policies, school-community relations, and broader structural factors such as educational policies and curriculum. That is, current theorising around multicultural education tends to take a holistic approach that highlights the importance of all these factors and the way they interlink with each another. In light of the recent developments in theories of multicultural education, this study has developed and adopted a multidimensional model of multicultural education. This model draws on the critical educationalist's view that education is transformative and draws on contemporary streams of current multicultural education theory that emphasise the multidimensional nature of education.

The multidimensional aspect of the model in this study assumes that school education is experienced and influenced in a number of areas relating to pedagogic choices, opportunities for social engagement, the involvement of families in their children's education; school resources, and the individual students' experiences and understanding of culture, identity and social background. The transformative dimension of the model recognises that students are disadvantaged by socially-constructed barriers to learning. In this sense, successful multicultural education requires change not only for students from culturally different backgrounds, but also more importantly in the various dimensions of the educational system and the schools in order to break down these barriers. Below is a conceptual model that

Staff Training and Resourcing

- Professional in service training, both general and discipline-specific, for teachers and staff about culturally diverse education
- provision of pedagogical materials
- extensive guidance about how to change and develop the curriculum
- professional development training that focuses on addressing teachers' attitudes and consciousness about cultural issues

Curriculum Change

- a holistic approach to curriculum change; incorporating cultural diversity across all subjects as a positive learning resource
- incorporation of various cultural perspectives, frames of reference and content
- recognition and development of different learning styles
- development of a participatory, inclusive classroom dialogue about culture, perspectives and knowledge
- educators to be open and to give recognition about the cultural content of their pedagogical positions

Parent Involvement

- NESB parent committees that report to staffing committees
- NESB parent education and skills training
- Liaison with community social worker
- Communication from school in community languages

Multi-dimensional Model of Multicultural Education

Community Involvement

- Community organisation-run forums and workshops with teachers and students
- Guest speakers with expertise in community issues and history
- Fostering student-community ties through research projects involving community members

Extracurricular Activities

- development of student discussion groups, within and across ethnic groups, to discuss cultural issues and to devise action plans for the school
- interactive guest lectures, workshops and forums involving community members
- encouragement of student leadership and initiative
- creative outlets for students to develop and express a sense of identity

School Environment and Policy Change

- analysis by staff leadership team, with assistance from parent and community representatives, of how school policies and mission statements may be changed to be more culturally inclusive
- school liaison with student, parent and community groups about non-curricular aspects of the school environment and how these may be changed to reflect and encourage cultural diversity, eg flexibility for religious practices and holidays, approaches to physical education, menus at canteens, etc.

outlines the various dimensions of education that can be changed to reflect multicultural perspectives:

Study Initiatives

The structure of the proposed model operates along four dimensions:

- Parents: Community-Schools Partnership Project
- Policy: Model of Best Practice
- Practice: On-line Teacher Support Materials (TSM)
- Pedagogy: Professional Development for Teachers

1. Community-Schools Partnership Project

The project's work with parents involves a Cultural Diversity Facilitator (CDF), who, in this case is a staff member from a local Arabic social

services provider. A series of eight Parent Modules have been developed to tackle parent-school specific issues and to improve parental overall involvement in schools' operations. 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.

2. Model of Best Practice

The Policy focus involves the development of a Model of Best Practice that has a focus on the whole school environment and policy changes. In order for this to happen, schools need to appropriately exhibit the following attributes: philosophy and structures; leadership and attitudes; resources and facilities; partnerships and relationships. If the entire

school is engaged in a process of collaborative transformation, then students are likely to find such changes meaningful, rich and consistent. In this process, the model adopted in this study recognizes the skills and capacities students bring to a transformative educational dialogue. Importantly, the model 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. While the emphasis lies in promoting improved learning outcomes for students who experience educational disadvantage, research clearly indicates that the benefits of inclusive multicultural education extend beyond the student learning environment to the broader school community.

3. On-line Teacher Support Materials (TSM)

The Practice dimension has been pursued through the development of a fully interactive website for teacher use—the Teacher Support Materials (TSM)[2]. Three groups of voices drawn from the research data collected between 2003 and 2006 are included on this website: students, parents and teachers of students from a variety of national, ethnic and religious groups including Iraqi Muslim, Christian of Assyrian ethnicity, Chaldean descent and Australian-born Lebanese. The TSM provides themed avenues for individual professional development as well as providing wide-ranging resources for use in the classroom. Ultimately the website will be complemented by a print TSM Guide.

4. Professional Development for Teachers

The Pedagogy dimension concerns professional development of school staff that is taking place 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 are 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.

This four-pronged approach to the social and educational experiences of Arab-Australian youth reflects the whole-school perspective pursued in this study where pedagogic structures and community/parent strategies are focused on producing better attainment outcomes for

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2   For more information on the TSM please visit the following website: www. teachingdiversity.org.au, Username: dev4, Password: jackburton

individual students as well as contributing to a culturally responsive school ethos for all.

Conclusion

One of the important aims of education is to ensure that all students, no matter what their linguistic, religious, cultural or socio-economic background, benefit from learning in ways that facilitate their full participation in the economy and in the broader community. While schools may reproduce social inequities, including racism and its effects upon particular minority groups, schools are also in a rare position of being able to directly challenge social injustices. Schools may undertake transformative practices to effect positive change in the school environment, both at social and educational levels.

For this to happen effectively, schools and educators need to be equipped with the necessary resources and experience to challenge social inequalities in the educational environment. Students and parents in the participating study often expressed an explicit desire for learning environments where their social experiences of racism and exclusion, and their cultural backgrounds, were acknowledged by schools and schools actively engaged with these issues. For this to be achieved, an integrated approach needs to be adopted, where schools, parents and communities form a strategic partnership aimed at reducing the effects of social barriers and at meeting the challenge of cross-cultural negotiation between diverse social groups.

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