

Constructing Inclusive Education in a Neo-Liberal Context: promoting inclusion of Arab-Australian students in an Australian context

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Abstract

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 in the neo-liberal context, 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.

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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, 377-8).

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, 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: 32).

Although now commonly recognised in the education policy-making of culturally pluralist nations, policy responses have often been based on an assumption that a non-mainstream background is an educational disadvantage (Campbell, 2000). Specifically, in a context of neo-liberal reform such as that experienced in education, as well as in other policy arenas throughout the 1990s, performativity has supplanted paternalism as the meta-discourse framing policy development (Yeatman 1994). This has 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). The key change in education in a neo-liberal context is the growth in competition at every level – between students, between teachers, between schools and types of schools, and between school districts (Marginson 2006, 209). Devolved governance based on competitive positioning, parental choice and *per capita* funding creates both opportunities and tensions for schools in the context of increased inter-racial tension post- 9/11. For those schools working with high levels of newly-arrived students, often living with multiple dimensions of disadvantage and limited opportunity to choose and act, the neo-liberal context can create a range of opportunities, expectations and demands that are difficult to reconcile.

In this paper we draw on research conducted from 2003 – 2006 in three Melbourne secondary schools characterised by high levels of cultural diversity and social disadvantage. 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. 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.

Data was collected from Arabic and non-Arabic students (n = 264), teachers (n = 117) and Arabic parents (n = 78) through surveys, focus groups and interviews and was analysed both longitudinally and comparatively. This paper commences with a discussion of multiculturalism in the Australian and introduces the Australian and Victorian education policy context. The theoretical underpinning of the research is then presented along with the research findings. Finally, the paper outlines the resources that have been developed with the aim of promoting cultural diversity as an educational advantage and assisting schools in creating a context to realize that 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. 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, these are only one dimension of multicultural education.

While all 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 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 (HREOC 2004; Mansouri & Kamp 2007, Mansouri 2005, Poynting & Ang 2004; Poynting, Noble, Tabar & Collins 2004; White 2004).

The educational policy context in detail

In Australia, education is a state responsibility notwithstanding the exertion of increasing influence by the federal government through the use of targeted funding and the granting of increased power to the Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs over the past few decades. Since 1996 the federal government has instigated a number of studies which have served as guiding principles for states' education policies including citizenship and democracy studies and values education. In particular, the *Values Education Study* (2003) has influenced curriculum development initiatives at a state level and echoes international moves to arrive at a framework of generic values that could guide the work of schools in an increasingly globalized and culturally diverse world.

The Victorian government's policy argues 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 replicates existing patterns of social inequality (Teese & Polesel 2003). The Victorian government has responded to these challenges through a range of policy initiatives building 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) (Victorian Curriculum & Assessment Authority 2004) in 2005. In 2008, a new Victorian *Blueprint for Early Childhood Development and School Reform* proposes a framework of system development and reform, partnerships with parents and communities, and workplace reform to underpin a lifecycle approach

to enhancing the health, development and learning foundations of all Victorians. All of these policies suggest implications and opportunities for Victorian schools and their communities as will now be outlined.

The *Multicultural Policy for Victorian Schools* (Department of Education, 1997) was a collaborative effort between the Victorian government's Department of Education and two federal Ministerial Advisory Councils. The policy outlines a number of criteria and aims for schools: the 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 were also expected to enable all students to develop skills and understandings to interact comfortably and competently in intercultural settings and to understand Australia's position in a globally interdependent world. The policy flagged the government's commitment 'to the development of an education system in which awareness and appreciation of cultural and linguistic pluralism becomes accepted, normal aspects of schooling' (1997, 7).

The *Guidelines for Managing Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in Schools* (Department of Education, Employment & Training, 2001) outlines the Victorian government's 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 and bias, bigotry, ethnocentrism, prejudice or racism are wholeheartedly rejected. This policy promotes diversity as an educational advantage, insofar as:

Diversity brings significant educational benefits to all students, teachers and administrators and the wider community. . . . Schools can be, and generally are, model communities of mutual respect, harmony and tolerance. (Department of Education, Employment & Training 2001, 2)

The *Blueprint for Government Schools* (Department of Education & Training 2003) developed by the Victorian government describes seven flagship strategies and initiatives under three themes: recognising and responding to diverse students' needs, building the skills needed in the education workforce and engendering a culture of continuous improvement in schools. The *Blueprint* also made recommendations for the identification and development of essential learnings - the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS). In its conclusion the *Blueprint* includes specific recognition

that current inequities across the system are unacceptable. Every government school student, irrespective of the school they attend, where they live or their social or economic status, is entitled to a high-quality school education and a genuine opportunity to succeed (Department of Education & Training 2003, n.p)

As such, the Victorian government has set a target of 90% completion of Y12, or its equivalent, for all students by 2010.

More broadly, the Multicultural Victoria Act (2004) came into effect on 1 January 2005 enshrining principles of access, participation and contribution, for all Victorian citizens, to services made available by the Victorian Government. The Multicultural Victoria Act outlines responsibilities for school councils, principals, staff and students. For instance, school councils are to ensure that the content of any existing policy document reflects the principles of multiculturalism. Councils must also ensure all members of the school community are equally entitled to access opportunities, participate in and contribute to the social, cultural, economic and political life of Victoria. School councils are charged with encouraging and facilitating 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 expected to affirm diversity in all aspects of their work practices and interactions with students, parents and other staff. School staffs are charged with 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.

Finally, students also have responsibilities under the Act and are expected to abide by the Student Code of Conduct, in particular the principles concerned with the valuing student individuality, including that of race, gender, or cultural diversity. Students are expected to participate in cultural awareness, anti-racism and other curriculum-linked strategies aimed at increasing respect for diversity.

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 policy 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 on-going 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 that drew on and developed 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 (Mansouri & Trembath, 2005).

Theoretical basis

The theoretical approach underpinning this study is motivated by two key factors namely the empowering of migrant youth to articulate their stories and the need to challenge existing school structures to become more inclusive. One of the theories informing this philosophical undertaking is Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Delgado & Steefancic, 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, 2). By locating marginalised students at the heart of its conceptual approach, CRT aims to capture the individual stories of students as the basis of a counter discourse that can challenge the dominant stereotypes of diverse groups. Schools need support in addressing the complexities of involving students in democratic school reform and creating structures that meaningfully engage culturally marginalised students (Rubin & Silva 2003).

Personal stories of not only students but also parents and teachers are powerful tools in inclusive education, allowing a growing challenge to 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). Given that this study has adopted a multidimensional approach to investigating the needs of Arabic background students, these diverse voices are of singular importance. This importance is further underscored by the fact that Australia, similarly to the United States of America and the United Kingdom, continues to confront a misalignment between the cultural background and social class of teachers and their students (Santoro & Allard, 2005). This significance of this misalignment was evident in our research findings. It is to those findings that we now turn.

Research findings

The research indicates that the Arabic-background students had less positive experiences regarding teacher-student relations, that they perceived racial tension in the school, and that they had some sense that

racism affected learning and behaviour. 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.

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. 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*. 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. In line with a key dimension of Critical Race Theory, producing individual subjective stories about race politics and intercultural relations is an important medium for generating counter narratives to the dominant discourses that can engender a sense of empowerment among marginalised groups. This is not to assert that individual narratives are assumed to be predominantly negative nor should they relate exclusively to instances of marginalization and exclusion.

In fact, many students in this study generally felt very positive about their social interactions with other students of all backgrounds however 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. Data collected from teachers goes some way to support these perceptions. 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.

This study's data reinforces Banks' (1997, 69) argument that even if the taught curriculum is reformed to reflect multicultural education dimensions, unless the 'deep structure' and the hidden curriculum of the school is also transformed, traditional unjust social structures will be perpetuated and ensure continuance of barriers to equitable learning for all students. It also supports research that argues for skills and resources to aide teachers in 'race reflection' (Milner, 2003) 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.

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; 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 includes 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 project is inspired if not entirely determined by aspects of

Critical Race Theory. 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. This is why the multicultural model adopted and implemented in this project has resulted in measurable positive attitudinal change among those surveyed (Mansouri and 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 the neo-liberal agenda 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 student and their families who are newly-arrived and are struggling to work within an unfamiliar Australian education system but also to challenge racism within multi-cultural schools settings. In this way, cultural diversity becomes an educational advantage that can benefit all students moving towards full participation in a globalized world.

The project has grown from the small seeds of a community's desire to enhance the outcomes of multicultural education in their local school. After three years of research and development it is now engaged in developing a multi-dimensional model that includes a range of resources for the use of school councils and leaders, teachers and parents. The 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 strategies are focused on producing better attainment outcomes for individual students as well as culturally responsive school ethos for all.

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