Challenges in Addressing Cultural Diversity: Approaches in Sydney Schools

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Abstract: An essential challenge for school educators continues to be how to better represent and negotiate the complexities of classrooms and school communities that are increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse. Schools approach cultural diversity in various ways. Drawing on a qualitative study in a number of government schools, we report on three different approaches engaged by schools in three culturally diverse areas of Sydney. These approaches are often shaped by socio-cultural factors such as the nature of the school and its related community, the commitment of teachers, particularly the executive leadership and the localised issues that may impact on school and community programs. Findings suggest that it is time for school educators to renew their efforts - in a more strategic and focused way - to provide an integrated, resources rich, whole school approach to educating for cultural and linguistic diversity that builds relationships between our diverse communities and empowers all students to succeed at school.

Keywords: Cultural Diversity, Schools, Approaches, School Communities

Introduction

ONE OF THE key educational challenges in Australian schools is how to cater for the educational needs of an increasingly culturally diverse school population. This challenge is just as real in educational systems that do strive to develop policies and programs to support schools to address cultural diversity as it is in those schools or systems that are less ethnically diverse and do not perceive the need to incorporate diversity issues in their curriculum.

In Australia's most populous state, NSW, almost one in four students in government schools comes from cultural and language backgrounds other than English. While most of these students are clustered across a number of Sydney school regions (NSW DET 2005), increasingly migrants are moving to regional cities and rural communities. This means that acknowledging and addressing cultural diversity remains an important issue for all school educators. In keeping with the NSW Department of Education and Training (NSW DET) 2005 policy documents, cultural diversity is defined as reflecting aspects of cultural, linguistic and religious diversity.

This paper discusses the extent to which a set of schools in different demographic areas of Sydney are addressing cultural diversity in the context of the school and its related community. In order to ascertain what is happening at the grass roots level, we felt it was important to provide a more localized school focus that details actual activities and community views

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rather than concentrating on State or regional policy based programs that form the backdrop to these activities.

Background

Australia has experienced a decade of what has been described by Jakubowicz (2008), as the slow death of multiculturalism, with a reshaping of the agenda towards the concept of cultural diversity and social inclusion. Recent Australian studies have analysed government policies for managing cultural diversity in Australian schools at a federal and state level (Mansouri & Percival Wood 2007; Leeman & Reid 2006; Matas & Bridges 2005), the rationale for multicultural education (Noble & Poynting 2000), and an analysis of the different kinds of multiculturalism (Jakubowicz 2006).

At a school level studies have focussed on classroom practices to address cultural diversity (Hyde 2010; Santoro 2009; Allard & Santoro 2006); cultural diversity and student dispositions towards school learning (Watkins & Noble 2008), and more effective ways of engaging culturally diverse school communities (Mansouri & Kamp 2007). At the same time in the USA there has been an interest in setting out a history of multicultural education (Grant & Chapman 2008), analysing the various approaches teachers have been taking to multicultural education in classrooms, including a focus on the ways to achieve more democratic classrooms by reflecting their diverse cultures and identities (Banks 2009).

A feature of recent studies has been the focus on re-conceptualisation of multicultural education (Schoorman & Bogotch 2010), moving school educators away from taking assimilationist or pluralist approaches towards more critical and transformative frameworks (May & Sleeter 2010; Gorski 2009; Gatimu 2009; Gorski 2006; Banks 2006). Gorski (2009) emphasised the importance of assisting teachers in multicultural teacher education programs and classrooms to move from the dominant conservative or liberal approaches to teaching about cultural diversity, and to more critically transformative approaches that he named as *teaching in a socio-political context* or *teaching as resistance and counter-hegemonic practice.*

Teacher Education and Professional Learning

There has also been a renewed interest in how cultural diversity is addressed in teacher education programs (Mills 2008; Arber 2005) and teacher professional learning (Gorski 2009; Guerra & Nelson 2008; Hilferty 2008). A major review of the literature about teacher education programs by Mills (2008) suggested that it was time to go beyond the fragmented and superficial treatment of cultural diversity in those programs. She argued that teacher educators needed to move towards the development of a more transformative socially just approach in their teacher education programs.

Based on their study of teachers' understandings of cultural diversity in one Australian state Thomas & Kearney (2008) concluded that teacher education programs needed a multi-faceted approach to prepare teachers for the culturally diverse classrooms they would encounter. According to Guerra and Nelson (2008) it was important to tackle the beliefs about cultural diversity held by teachers first, before it was possible to work effectively on ways of changing teaching practices.

Multi-dimensional Whole School Approach

In developing a more integrated and transformative approach to cultural diversity in school education in an Australian context, we wanted to highlight Mansouri and Kamp's (2007) multi dimensional whole school approach, based on their study of the educational and social experiences of Arab-Australian students in Victorian schools and their interactions with teachers, other students and parents. Described as a transformative multicultural education model they have outlined a number of key dimensions where change was needed. These included changes in the school environment, policy change, community involvement, parent involvement, staff training and resourcing, curriculum change, and extra-curricular activities. By focussing on these dimensions they felt the model would help school educators to achieve changes at the school level through improved access for parents and community groups, thereby breaking down various exclusionary school practices.

The Study

The main focus of our study (Burridge & Chodkiewicz 2008) was at the school level, analysing how a number of government schools were responding to the changing cultural, linguistic and religious diversity in their school and school community. In reflecting on that study here we were interested in how we could categorise the approaches schools were taking. In doing so schools, teachers and educational policy makers could be assisted to become more involved with and draw more effectively on the cultural and linguistic resources available in their school and its community. Also future policy initiatives and professional teacher development programs could be informed by the analysis.

The study involved qualitative research in a number of public schools in three regions of Sydney. The researchers sought to include both primary and secondary schools in localities with varying levels of cultural diversity, as a way of helping to better identify and understand the approaches that schools were taking. The schools were chosen after discussions with NSW DET officers who provided a list of possible schools we could approach in different areas of Sydney with varying demographic populations. This paper outlines events and practices identified in three specific schools. A primary school in an area of high cultural diversity, a high school in a culturally homogenous area and a high school in a predominantly mono-cultural area. A series of structured interviews and focus group discussions were carried out with members of the school executive, teachers and students in the schools. In addition, key members of the local community were included in the interviews and local government documents were accessed to gather further data on cultural diversity programs. As funding was limited, we were only able to conduct the research in a small number of schools and a larger comparative study was not possible. We sought however, to include schools in different demographic areas that displayed a variety of characteristics. We feel the insights gained are valuable and provide the stepping-stones for further research and policy development.

A grounded theory (Glaser, 1992) approach was used to analyse the data – as this allowed the voices of teachers and students to be heard. A number of key themes emerged from the interview data that were then written up as distinct school case studies. As this was a small study it was not possible to fully analyse school teaching programs, investigtate subject areas, nor to observe classroom teaching practices.

We were able to explore the ways that each particular school engaged with the cultural diversity of their schools and how they connected with the local community. This included reflecting on the school policies, programs, involvement with parents and the local community. By doing so our study addressed key parts of Mansouri and Kamp's (2007) multi-dimensional multicultural education model.

School Support Policies and Programs

Significant efforts have been made over more than thirty years to develop and implement a range of policies and programs to support educators and schools across Australia, including NSW, to address the policy of multiculturalism and more recently cultural diversity and social exclusion.

In NSW government schools, support is provided centrally and regionally to address issues across aspects of cultural, linguistic and religious diversity (NSW DET 2010). Actions are not mandated and it remains up to each individual school to determine what programs or services they utilize. Schools are encouraged to address *cultural diversity* through particular programs and services that focus on anti-racism education, cross-cultural understanding, community capacity building and a newly developed area of refugee support. *Linguistic diversity* is addressed through English as Second Language education, interpreting and translations, and the study of community languages. While to date, no specific programs have been developed to address *re ligious diversity*, a dedicated websection has brought together a range of useful materials to assist schools with information about aspects of religious diversity for a number of the main religious faiths.

Approaches to Cultural Diversity at the School Level

The schools in our study approached cultural diversity in different ways. What emerged from an analysis of the data were three distinctive responses dealing with diversity, which we describe below. Schools in the main, implemented one of the following approaches:

- a pro-active approach;
- a reactive approach; or
- an inactive or disinterested approach.

Taking a *pro-active* approach meant that a school saw cultural diversity as a positive aspect of their school and deemed it an important part of its links with the local school community. A school demonstrated that it was working within the framework of both departmental and regional policies to acknowledge, celebrate and support cultural diversity across a number of areas of the school.

The *reactive* approach saw a school responding to issues of cultural diversity only after a major incident or event occurred that impacted on the school and its immediate community. The school leadership reacted by bringing together staff from across the school, identifying areas of concern and implementing a number of initiatives, that drew on departmental cultural diversity programs to address these concerns.

The *inactive or disinterested* approach meant a school perceived itself and its community as being largely culturally homogenous, with only a small and generally invisible proportion

of students coming from diverse cultural backgrounds. While cultural diversity may have been seen as an important issue for the wider society, the school leadership did not see the need to address cultural diversity as a major policy priority in their school.

The remainder of this paper outlines each of these approaches in more detail. Our analysis highlights the relevant activities (programs, events, celebrations) organised by the schools, and ways that parents and local community associations were acknowledged or included in the schools. In doing so we are not suggesting that the demography of a school's area alone determines the kind of response a school will take, but that being more aware of these different kinds of responses can help educators to better design and implement school based cultural diversity programs.

Pro-active Approach

The school that we found had adopted a pro-active approach was a small primary school located in an area that had become highly culturally diverse over a number of years as a result of successive waves of migration. According to 2006 census figures, 46% of residents in the local area were born overseas. The proportion was far greater than the 31% of people born overseas across the greater Sydney area, making it one of the most culturally diverse communities in Australia. Residents came from more than 50 different, mostly non-English speaking, countries. The countries of origin with the largest numbers of residents in descending order were Korea, China, Sri Lanka and India. There was a high level of linguistic diversity, with 56% of residents speaking a language other than English at home. The main religious affiliation was Christian (63%), although there were sizable numbers following Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam (Burridge & Chodkiewicz 2008).

As a school located in a highly diverse community it responded in what seemed a more open, positive and engaging way to cultural diversity. It featured ethno-cultural differences as a positive strength in its online school profile, made efforts across the school to recognise, acknowledge, celebrate, and include the various ethnicities and language groups in the school's population.

The school principal felt it was important to teach children to be aware of cultural diversity and efforts were being made across the whole school that included teachers, students, parents, and links into the local community. There were a number of celebrations and events throughout the year when the school acknowledged and highlighted cultural diversity. It did this by building a whole school based program on the themes of *Harmony Day*, a day set aside for schools to celebrate cultural diversity, that were not merely tokenistic, but encapsulated pedagogically sound practices with culturally responsive teaching. The school also celebrated particular communities' national days, such as Chinese New Year. The impetus for developing stronger connections with parents in the local community started with the recognition by the principal at a *Harmony Day* celebration a number of years ago that parents wanted to be more involved with the school:

We had a special parent planting of the hands of harmony in our peace garden just after the morning assembly, because the parents were already there, and they planted their hands and then they didn't want to go home and they just stood and chatted and chatted and I thought, this is an opportunity I should have something else going.... and it was the simplest activity yet the nicest activity.

The school said it worked within departmental and regional cultural diversity policies and drew on various departmental programs to support school activities. It employed a number of bi-lingual assistants and also made a consistent effort to make parents from non-English speaking backgrounds feel welcome and involved at the school. Employing community liaison officers and two community language teachers (one Tamil, the other Chinese) enabled the school to reach out more effectively and make contact with parents in their own language:

> *Another aspect is having community language teachers or cultural liaison officers in your school and for them to be doing the outreach to parents that is such an important part of making schools work.*

In addition to various celebrations and working with administrative staff and teachers to make the school a more welcoming place for parents the school also ran an oral history project where family members could record their personal stories. Regular morning teas were organised at school that focussed on bringing parents from different cultural backgrounds into the school. School newsletters were translated into the main community languages spoken at the school.

While there was no direct involvement with non-English local community associations, the school did highlight its involvement in events that were held out of school hours. These included students and teachers participating in art shows, multicultural food fairs, and in the annual street fair organised by the local council. The school also supported the teaching of a number of community languages at the school.

Challenges the school faced included ensuring that children from Anglo-Celtic backgrounds also felt welcomed at school. The Principal noted that there had been some adverse comments from a couple of parents, but they had been only a minority:

> *A couple of them have told us that, we're being invaded here, we're being outnumbered and all the school cares about is the Chinese kids; that sort of comment, but again that's a personality thing about somebody who's also quite limited in their experience.*

And she noted that it was also important for the school to continue to demonstrate its interest in Australian history and heritage:

> *...the Australian heritage, its promoted here as much as we can, so, we still keep up with the Anzac day traditions, our Remembrance Day, all of the traditions and history we feel important to impart to the kids.*

Therefore promoting diversity took effort and long term commitment:

> *I'm not sure how you work it. Its so easy in a small school, we have morning teas for parents and we try to do that at least once or twice a term. We have translations in newsletters and initially it used to be really frowned upon by the Anglo/Saxon background parents. But we've been doing it for years and years and years and the last three years I haven't heard a complaint about that. We can't get to all cultures in all languages in the newsletter but we do make an effort and I think that's valued.*

A final comment from the school was written by a student on a peace poster at the school:

[Our school] is like a great barrier reef full of many different fish and interesting coral that makes one big happy group.

Reactive Approach

An example of a school taking a *reactive* approach was a high school located in a predominantly mono-cultural area, south east of Sydney. Almost 17% of residents were born overseas, with most were born in English speaking countries. Even so, the locality had residents from more than 30 different non-English speaking countries. Linguistic diversity was quite low, with just over 10% of residents speaking a language other than English at home. Religious affiliation was mainly Christian, with 76% identifying as Christians.

According to both school staff and students, the school and their local community had been impacted by major international events such as 2001 New York Twin tower attacks, Bali Bombings in 2002 and the 2003 Iraq War. These events had led to an increase in tension, increased racist incidents, community division and greater isolation of Middle Eastern students at the school and in the local community.

However it was a major local event, the Cronulla beach racial riots in December 2005, that had a direct impact on the school and its local community, including a lock down of the school for two days. According to the school deputy principal:

What happened in our playground was that the children with Middle Eastern heritage all broke away from their groups... they became a separate group, almost as if they were there trying to defend themselves in a sense.

The deputy principal noted that the school also had an anti-racism committee that was made up of students from non-English speaking backgrounds who:

.... worked to support kids who had been victims of racism ... ... it had worked quite well for quite a long time like that, but I think the whole Cronulla thing brought us a whole new set of needs that we had to respond to.

The impact of the Cronulla beach riots in 2005 prompted the school leadership to undertake a radical rethink of their responses to what they saw were a set of new challenges brought on by the increased level of racial tensions that existed both inside the school and across the school's wider community.

The school reacted by taking a range of actions in what it described as an activity based interactive approach to cultural diversity. The main focus of their actions was on involving students at the school in departmental programs, events and cultural exchanges. This included running an anti-racism program for students, promoting the value of multiculturalism within the school, and arranging for students to attend and be involved in a number of cultural events and a cultural exchange program:

If kids can interact with each other through an activity and have fun with it, it breaks down more barriers than textbook work which tells them what they should and shouldn't think.

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Among the programs mentioned by the school principal was a NSW DET funded anti-racism drama based on an education program called *Cooling Conflicts* that was designed to assist students to manage conflict in more productive ways. The school also organised a mix of events at the school, visits to other centres, attendance at cultural events organised in the community, and a number of cultural exchanges with schools with a high level of cultural diversity. The school organised a number of special days to celebrate cultural diversity, including a multicultural awareness day and a unity and diversity day. Students attended a number of local community events including a local council spring fair that also celebrated cultural diversity.

The most effective initiatives were the cultural exchanges that included involving the students in a number of visits and activities with recently arrived refugee students who were attending a local NSW DET Intensive English Language centre. The student meetings with African Muslim refugees were assessed as being highly successful, because they enabled students to connect with students of their own age from other cultures and to develop ongoing relationships with other young people who were from cultural backgrounds that they had never encountered before. A teacher explained:

> *I took across some African girls and boys... I took across some hijab-wearing Muslim students, and some non hijab-wearing Muslim students, and some Christian Lebanese... We now have kids [here] who have developed and are continuing to develop, relationships independently of our exchanges, which is great, which is what we'd like to see.*

At the time of our study the school's main priority was student-to-student focused programs rather than activities that sought to involve non-English speaking parents or local non-English speaking community associations. One of the positive outcomes noted by the Deputy Principal was that through the positive relationships emerging from the cultural exchanges many more ESL students were starting to enrol at the school and it was envisaged that community engagement would occur as a result of the program.

The Inactive or Disinterested Approach

The school taking an inactive or disinterested approach was a high school in another largely mono-cultural area in the northern suburbs of Sydney. While there had been a small increase in cultural diversity in the area, as a result of the settlement of new refugee groups, it had 26% of residents who were born overseas, with only 14% from non-English speaking backgrounds. The area had traditionally been seen as a largely homogenous, predominantly upper middle class Anglo-Australian community, where cultural diversity was largely invisible.

The overseas born residents were mainly from Western European countries, with a small number from Asian backgrounds, and an even smaller number of recently arrived refugees groups. The proportion of residents speaking a language other than English was quite low (14.7%) and most residents reported a Christian religious affiliation (69%). Historically, the demographics of this community led to the impression that cultural and linguistic differences were largely non-existent and therefore issues of racism and social exclusion were not a priority.

The Principal noted that schools in the area were not culturally diverse and that even the older immigrant groups, mostly from southern Europe, had been well assimilated into the community and their cultural ties had been diffused:

... now the Italian group seems to have... they barely even identify themselves as a cultural group to any major extent.

He also noted that racism was not an issue for the schools in the area, and that this had been confirmed in his discussions with other local school principals:

It's not racial issues and [its] not a major issue in terms of any management issues or... we meet as a group of 5-6 principals regularly, and its not an issue that comes up as a concern...

A feature of the inactive or disinterested approach was that cultural diversity was not seen as important or relevant for either the school or for the local area. As the school leadership did not see cultural diversity as an issue it had to address, it was not a feature of the school's profile or mentioned as a part of the school or its community. Nor was cultural diversity included in any school events or programs or mentioned as part of any links with the local community. The principal of the school indicated that there weren't any real cultural issues to address in their school as he noted that:

I guess there's not the same confronting challenges here.

This meant that while the school could understand that it was good to promote cultural tolerance, it did not see the need to artificially create an issue, particularly as cultural diversity wasn't an issue in their school or their local community.

Apart from small scale activities during the annual celebration of *Harmony Day*, the principal noted that multiculturalism was probably emphasised more in local primary schools. One event that the school did mention was a values forum, facilitated over the year by federal government funding. The forum was extremely well attended by parents and was deemed to be highly successful. However, as it turned out what the forum addressed reflected more the aspirations of parents within this community and was focused on student achievement and motivation, rather than being oriented to a discussion of issues of 'citizenship and values'. The principal noted, probably quite accurately:

It wasn't so much around citizenship it was more about the role here and helping their kids achieve their best and that struck a cord. Probably if we'd have had issues around citizenship we might have struggled to get the numbers. But when it was linked to their own children and how parents might assist them to do better, homework, those sort of things, then it struck a chord with parents, so we had a really good response.

The only school programs connected to cultural diversity we found involved English language classes for a small number of students who were refugees and who needed assistance with learning English. In relation to parents and the local community, the school had not tried to reach out or engage with any non-English speaking parents or with local non-English speaking community associations.

Conclusion

Education systems in Australia have developed a set of policies to assist schools to engage with increasingly culturally diverse school populations. These policies are underpinned by central and regional programs that support schools and teachers who wish to address some of the complexities that arise from the large number of cultures, languages and religions that are now part of the wider Australian community. It is clear, however, that school responses vary from school to school and region to region. The three approaches we have described — pro-active, reactive, and inactive or disinterested — reflect the way that some schools have viewed and responded to the issues of cultural, linguistic and religious diversity.

These three distinctive approaches suggest that school responses to diversity were shaped by a range of factors that included the school context (including the nature and extent of cultural diversity in the school and its local community), the degree of interest of the school leadership in the issue, the impact of events involving cultural or religious based conflict that occurred in the local community, and the support provided by the department to address particular issues. It also points to the fact that with schools facing what has been described as a 'crowded curriculum', and the various competing agendas that determine school activities, cultural diversity has been de-emphasised to become just one among many other issues that may or may not be addressed at a school level.

Our study finds that despite the rich cultural and linguistic diversity of an area such as Sydney, there are a proportion of schools that fail to appreciate the opportunities that are presented by engaging with the cultural diversity in their communities. Others have engaged with cultural differences in response to specific critical incidents that have provided insights into the undercurrents of social and cultural tensions that may exist in their school and their wider community. And there are a proportion of schools who have responded positively to the diversity of their school community.

Given that there will continue to be a range of different kinds of responses to cultural diversity at a school level, we suggest that educators need to consider taking a more nuanced approach to the realities of the diversity in our classrooms. Schools and teachers need to be encouraged and supported to become more active participants in meeting the challenges of our diverse classrooms. They need to move from being inactive or reactive to acknowledging that we cannot deny the impacts of ongoing cultural, linguistic and religious diversity of our communities.

Part of the challenge for school educators is to revitalise their efforts in this important policy area by restating more clearly the value and place of cultural diversity in schools — especially each of the elements of cultural, linguistic and religious diversity. At the same time there is a need to understand importance of addressing teacher beliefs, attitudes and knowledge of diversity (Guerra & Nelson 2009), in any attempts to bring about more meaningful and longer lasting change in schools.

Our analysis suggests there is a need to revisit the way that cultural diversity programs are provided at a school level. It is vital that more strategic, targeted and focussed support for the implementation of cultural diversity policies is provided across the school system at the school level, regardless of whether it is perceived as an area of high or low level of cultural diversity. In shaping new policy directions and support programs, these strategies need to be informed by the kinds of approaches that schools demonstrate they are taking. This

means that the type of resource and professional development support provided needs to be tailored to how each school positions itself in relation to cultural diversity.

The system support provided, either through the provision of programs, resources, direct funding of professional learning or curriculum activities needs to focus on school leadership, teachers and students, and as suggested by Mansouri and Kamp (2007) adopt a whole school approach, rather than taking just a narrowly focused one. At a minimum it means supporting schools and teachers to move from being disinterested to a position where they can start acknowledging and celebrating cultural diversity. This includes making cross-cultural contacts, allowing for differing cultural perspectives to be debated and encouraging the learning of languages other than English so that we as a community can engage in the conversations and politics of the global village.

A multi-dimensional model, such as Mansouri & Kamp's (2007) model, can help provide a framework for the further development of strategies, and for providing support in teacher education and professional development programs. It can help focus efforts on a number of the key dimensions highlighted in the model, thereby helping to move away from a piecemeal approach and what Mills (2008) has described as the fragmented and superficial treatment of diversity in teacher education. In this way teacher professional development resources will be utilised more strategically for a more optimal effect in each context. By being more strategic in support for schools, it should ensure that schools and teachers experience a more integrated, resources rich, whole school approach to education for cultural and linguistic diversity.

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