

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Cultural diversity in the early childhood classroom in Australia: Educators' perspectives and practices

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The steady change in demographics in a multicultural Australia has had significant implications for early childhood educators. This study, set in a multicultural early childhood setting in Australia, explored the different perceptions about cultural diversity and the pedagogic practices of a small staff of early childhood educators. Information was gathered via interview and participant observation and data was interpreted using a Miles and Huberman (1994) approach to data analysis. Findings suggested that (a) teachers viewed the cultural backgrounds that students brought with them as a burden (b) were preoccupied with achieving student conformity into the dominant culture and (c) lived very much in fear of their students falling below curriculum standards. Recommendations arising from the study focus on raising metacultural sensitivity (the ability to understand and assess one's own culture and that of others at a deep level), incorporating more critical reflection upon pedagogy into teacher education courses, injecting more resources into schools dealing with cultural diversity and providing more formalised dialogue between teachers and parents from different cultural backgrounds.

Keywords: early childhood education, cultural diversity, metacultural sensitivity, critical education

Der stetige Wandel der Demographie im multikulturellen Australien hat erhebliche Auswirkungen für die dortigen Lehrer und Erzieher. Diese Studie erforscht die unterschiedlichen Vorstellungen von kultureller Vielfalt und die pädagogischen Praktiken einer Gruppe von Kindererziehern unter Berücksichtigung des multikulturellen Hintergrundes Australiens. Die Daten auf denen diese Studie basiert, hauptsächlich gesammelt auf der Basis von Gesprächen und Beobachtungen, wurden weitestgehend mit

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dem Miles und Huberman (1994) Ansatz zur Datenanalyse analysiert. Befunde legen nahe, dass Lehrer (a) die kulturellen Hintergründen ihrer Schüler als Belastung ansehen (b) damit beschäftigt waren die Schüler in Konformität mit der dominierenden Kultur zu bringen (c) die Befürchtung haben, dass ihre Schüler die gesetzten Unterrichtsziele verfehlen. Die Resultate der Studie legen nahe, dass eine Verbesserung des meta-kulturellen Einfühlungsvermögens (also die Möglichkeit die eigene Kultur und die Anderer zu einem hohen Grad zu verstehen) und des Bewusstseins der Verschiedenheit von Kindern in Schulen, mehr kritische Reflexion über die Bedeutung von Pädagogik in der Ausbildung von Lehrern, mehr Mittel fuer den Umgang mit kultureller Vielfalt in Schulen und einen formaleren Dialog zwischen Lehrern und Eltern aus verschiedenen kulturellen Hintergründen notwendig sind.

Introduction and background

Australia is home to over 1.5 million children of immigrant families representing almost 33% of all children in Australia (Katz & Redmond, 2009). Forty per cent of Australia's population comprises first and second generation immigrants and one in four Australians was born overseas. Among young children, 15% speak a language other than English. Thirty years after the Whitlam Labor government introduced its multicultural policy, however, children from immigrant families still experience considerable disadvantage in educational institutions, particularly in the form of prejudice and social injustice as expressed by teachers and peers (Mansouri & Kamp, 2007). Such inequitable conditions tend to be more prevalent within communities comprising lower socio-economic groups, indigenous Australians, immigrants and other minority groups (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006).

In February 2011, the Australian federal government introduced a new multiculturalism policy designed to work in conjunction with a national anti-racism partnership and strategy. The policy stated that:

Australians from all backgrounds will be given every opportunity to participate in and contribute to Australia and its social, economic and cultural life. Australians from all backgrounds are also entitled to receive equitable access to government services. The Government will strengthen its access and equity policies to ensure that government programs and services are responsive to the needs of Australia's culturally and linguistically diverse communities (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2011, p. 5).

In more recent years, Australia has emphasised access and equality for all. Government legislation aims to provide Australians of all cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds with access to government programs and services (Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2006). Despite this, many immigrant families still face difficulties in accessing basic social services (Pe-Pua, Gendra, Katz & O'Connor, 2010). Refugees, from Asia and the Middle East, do not generally do as well educationally as the general population (Cahill, 1996; Mansouri & Trembath, 2005) and can encounter discrimination, racism and marginalisation (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006).

Multicultural Education (ME) is a progressive approach to education that is grounded in principles of social justice, educational equity and critical pedagogy. ME involves issues of inclusive curriculum and teaching styles which are critiqued at a macro level and aims to transform the wider society by providing students with educational experiences that are socially and culturally relevant (Keengwe, 2010). This contrasts with the general misconception of ME as a curriculum that focuses mainly on teaching children about other cultures, an approach that can become tokenistic and superficial and what has been called a 'tourist approach' (Schoorman, 2011). Ang and colleagues (Ang, Brand, Noble & Sternberg, 2006; Ang, Brand, Noble & Wilding, 2002) report Australians as having a 'practical tolerance' to multiculturalism but an ambivalence towards the value of multiculturalism for Australian society. Australians also see negative consequences of cultural diversity for Australia and fear minority groups such as Muslims and Arabs (Dandy & Pe-Pua, 2010).

The study reported in this article sought to determine how early childhood teachers, operating in a culturally-diverse educational setting, perceived and responded to cultural differences in their diverse classrooms or settings. Early childhood classrooms and settings in Australia cater for children from ages 0 to 8 and can include public and private providers.

Educational Backdrop

Early childhood educators have drawn on a range of perspectives to inform their teaching practice, including developmental theories, socio-cultural theories, socio-behaviourist theories, critical theories and post-structuralist theories (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations for the Council of Australian Governments (DEEWR), 2009). These theories have been formulated around fluctuating images of the child and early childhood settings.

Formal early childhood education in Australia has metamorphosed from philanthropy and educational reform in the early days to social and educational reform developed out of a transformed image of the child. Children have gone from being seen as vulnerable and weak to being seen as strong-willed and powerful, independent and capable. Educational pedagogy now has to acknowledge children's capacities and entitlements (Murphy, 2006; Woodrow & Press, 2007) as well as their 'rights' (UNICEF, 2011). Postmodern early childhood programs, based on critical pedagogies, poststructuralist, feminist and post colonialist theories, (MacNaughton, 2003) and driven by principles of social transformation and democratic education, recognise early childhood settings as environments that can be inequitable and unjust with regard to lower socio-economic groups, indigenous Australians, immigrants and other disadvantaged groups (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006). Foundational to many early childhood programs in Australia are child-centred pedagogies which are characterised by a constructivist approach to teaching and learning (New & Cochran, 2007).

The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia was endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments in 2009 to assist educators in providing effective learning environments for children. The framework is made up of five principles that reflect contemporary theories on early childhood pedagogy. 'Respect for diversity' is the fourth principle. It supports educators developing a curriculum that recognises, responds to and honours the different cultures, values, beliefs, abilities, identities and practices of families (DEEWR, 2009). Developmentally Appropriate Practice

(DAP) is also a term widely used in early childhood education to describe ways of teaching that reflect a teacher's knowledge of each child's learning and development. DAP should take into account learners' ages, experiences, capabilities, interests, strengths and needs (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

Studies have indicated a need for educators to understand, respect and respond to culturally diverse situations in the classroom (Han & Thomas, 2010; Montgomery, 2001; Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006; Souto-Manning & Mitchell, 2009). They need to reflect upon their approach to diversity (Irvine, 2003) and the fact that they may be socialising young children into their own dominant cultural contexts (Fleet, 2006; Souto-Manning & Mitchell, 2009) with the risk of loss of familial culture and language.

Research Method

In order to consign a holistic and in-depth perspective to the study, a qualitative paradigm was utilised with a social anthropological approach to data analysis and an ethnographic, approach to data collection. The following research question was the driver for the study: How do early childhood educators perceive and respond to cultural differences in multicultural classrooms?

Data Collection

Participant Profile

The researcher was both ethnographer and interviewer; spending time in the school context as an Educator Assistant while also formally observing the interactions between teachers and students. Four early childhood teachers were selected to be in the study at an Australian school known for its multicultural (80% of its students come from non-English speaking backgrounds) and low socio-economic background profile. In order to cater to student needs, the school has employed a high ratio of educational assistants and teachers who have English as an additional language. Each participant teacher in this study came from a different cultural background and each had a different level of teaching experience as seen in Table 1 below.

SCHOOL	TEACHER	GENDER	AGE	ETHNIC BACKGROUND	TIME IN AUSTRALIA	YEARS OF TEACHING EXPERIENCE
Independent K-12	T1	Female	32	Indian	Born in Australia	3
	T2	Female	35	Anglo-Saxon Australian	Born in Australia	8
Year 1	T3	Female	26	Chinese	24 years	3
Year 2	T4	Female	35	Bangladeshi	31 years	4

Table 1: Profile of participant early childhood teachers involved in the study

Participant teachers were interviewed using a semi-structured, open-ended approach in order to obtain prolonged, in-depth conversation and rich data. Interview questions are listed in Appendix 1. As an EA, the researcher was able to participate fully within the school context as a member of the group. Her identity as a researcher was known to the teachers and students and the dual role allowed for first-hand observation of participants and students in their lessons. Field notes were written up over the four weeks of observational sessions and during the two days in which the researcher was an Educator Assistant. Data collected from initial interviews were used to guide observation checklists. Field notes were both reflective and descriptive. The interaction between researcher and teacher was integral to analysis and interpretation of participant values and beliefs.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was based on a Miles and Huberman approach (1994). Data from interviews and observations were transcribed and coded, themes identified and data reduced in order to arrive at abstract concepts without significant loss of meaning. The data was organised under headings describing the nature and characteristics of participants' understandings and practices as observed and interpreted by the researcher. In order to retain the essence of the responses, findings were documented as thick descriptions in the form of mini narratives intended to describe the participants' behaviours within a given context, thus giving meaning to observed actions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Similarly, analysis was supported by extensive participant quotation in order to build an in depth picture of participants' understandings of, and responses to, cultural diversity. It is recognised that all data were filtered and shaped through the cultural lens of the researcher's beliefs and experiences as she deconstructed, analysed and interpreted what she had seen or heard from the informants (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003) and that, as a result, this may be only one interpretation of the reality of events. Only a small sample of the data and findings from the full thesis are described in this article.

Findings and Discussion

Teachers' Conceptions of Cultural Diversity

The early childhood participant teachers focused on differences in culture, religion, language, values and attitudes, in line with the Australian government's mantra of recognition of cultural and ethnic diversity (Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2006). They held positive attitudes towards what they understood to be multiculturalism. However, they believed that multiculturalism could only work with appropriate regulation. Such attitudes reflect those shared by other educators in the field who generally support the retention of first culture and first language in children without seeing it as their responsibility to teach and maintain these (McInerney, 1987). The intent is to teach the children the English language and to immerse them into the dominant culture as can be seen in the quote below:

[diversity is]... great as long as it does not embellish or compromise on the already existing Australian way! By this I mean if a culture runs in direct conflict with the values Australia has established. I believe in assimilation to some degree as it is vital in order to maintain overall underpinning Australian values (T2).

Multiculturalism was believed to be workable only if people of culturally diverse backgrounds shared the English language, values and attitudes of a democratic society.

Formation of Cultural Conceptions: Overt and Covert Messages

The participants' conceptions of cultural diversity came from many sources: movies, television, books, social media and reactions to their own ethnicity by significant others mirroring research attributing our cultural and social inheritance to this lifelong process of socialisation (Richards, Brown & Ford, 2007). Similar to the children mentioned by T2, the participants had absorbed messages while trying to make sense of the world and the people around them. T2, in particular, had begun to recognise that it is as easy to let go of negative cultural conceptions as it is to have attained them as seen in her comments below:

The social realities that are fed to us through the media can either support or harm our beliefs about our families, about others and ourselves. Our views of other people do not determine their happiness or success but it does open up or undermine the access they have to opportunities and resources within society... try being Muslim in today's society, it's not easy (T2).

Montgomery (2001) emphasises the necessity for teachers to examine and question their attitudes and beliefs. In doing so, they will be able to confront any stereotypes or biases that have influenced their value system and overcome preconceived stereotypes, forming a trusting and accepting environment for both students and parents (Richards, Brown & Ford, 2007).

Reflections on Cultural Diversity: An Asset or a Burden?

The participants' comments reflected the many social identities people have in relation to racial identity, gender, culture, language, economic status, family structure and religion. T1's comment below acknowledged the importance of teachers understanding the cultural diversity of the children and families with whom they interact:

As early childhood trained educators we were taught to be serious about valuing each child and each family.... we are role models for the children and their families and our actions and behaviours need to prompt others to perceive minority groups in a positive way (T1).

T4 added, 'We need to provide positive experiences related to diversity and we can't do this if we have not addressed our own feelings about differences'. In order to work effectively with ethnic minority families, teachers recognised the need to be critical of their own history, beliefs and values (Montgomery, 2001). The participants perceived they had established a platform from which to be sensitive and tolerant to cultural diversity in their classrooms and focused on successful educational outcomes, a stance also reported in the research of Keeffe and Carrington (2006).

Perspectives on Cultural Diversity and Teaching and Learning in the Multicultural Classroom

Responses were divided into two over-arching perspectives: English language acquisition and immersion into the dominant culture in order to meet standards.

Participant teachers felt convinced of the need for their students to speak English in the classroom (and enforced an English only rule). They were concerned about the limited ability of some students to do this. Children of English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EAL/D) backgrounds were seen as having a language deficit. The participants believed the children would suffer socially and academically if they could not speak Australian Standard English, leaving little room for linguistic diversity. Such beliefs seemed to have stemmed from the participants' own personal experiences as immigrant children learning English as an additional language (EAL) in schools (Leeman & Reid, 2006; Pickering & Gandlgruber, 2010).

The researcher observed T4 talking to a young Indonesian girl called Faza (pseudonym) who had come to Australia two months earlier:

T4: Ok let's have a look at what you've written

(T4 takes a look at Faza's report)

T4: *(points to word 'Solar System')* Now remember what I said about this word?

Faza: Yes teacher *(nods head)*

T4: *(continues pointing to 'Solar System')* Can you say this word for me?

Faza: *(looks at T4)* Soler System

T4: No *(articulates wording and moves mouth slowly)* So-lar *(emphasises on ar)* system

Faza: Solar *(emphasises on ar)* system

T4: *(laughs)* Yes but you don't have to say it like that *(referring to emphasis on ar)*

(Faza looks down and smiles)

T4: Don't worry we'll keep practising but you need to try and say it right because the principal will be watching you and everyone else. There are some other words to practise too but we'll get there slowly won't we?

(Faza nods)

Naone & Au (2010) state that, beyond expanding perspectives of cultural diversity, providing high quality and accessible education is essential to bring children up to the "standard" and the previous dialogue would seem to confirm this view. What is noted here is the way in which the teacher uses fear of the principal to coerce the student into a better performance. The same tactic is used by another teacher in the dialogue below but this time it is the threat of the parent being told that is used to compel the student:

The whole class had just finished reciting vocabulary words on the whiteboard

T3: *(addressing an EAL student from Somalia)* Ok you read the words on your own now.

Abdi: I don't know them.

T3: Yes you do. We just read them together.

Abdi: I only know some of them.

(Abdi begins to read the words on the board and misses a few words he is unable to read)

T3: Now read the words again but this time I want you to read all of them.

(Abdi sighs and begins to read again and struggles at the third word that reads 'bye')

(Another student in the class calls out in an attempt to help Abdi) It says bye!

T3: *(Addresses Student)* Excuse me! Don't call out. He needs to do this by himself *(looks to Abdi to continue)*

(Abdi continues to struggle and T3 prompts him to stop)

T3: Hmm someone hasn't been practising at home have they? I may need to talk to your mother this afternoon.

Children were provided with limited opportunities to interact in their own languages and those of others (although some teachers made an effort to include these). T3 and T4, in particular, hoped to teach children within a traditional content-based curriculum where there are significant expectations to help students fulfil curriculum standards including an expectation of autonomous learning. The teacher monitored the students to make sure they were meeting "the standards" as seen in the conversation below:

T4: *(Marking Mental Maths work of an EAL student from Libya):* Remember we said last time that is not how we do these questions. We don't multiply we divide.

(Ahmad nods)

T4: So what do we do instead of multiply? *(looks at Ahmad)*

(Ahmad shrugs)

T4: We divide! *(draws division symbol on Ahmad's page)*

(T4 claps hands to gain class attention)

T4: (*Addressing whole class*) Everybody take a look at question four. What operation do we use to solve this problem?

(*Another student calls out*) You use divide because you have to share!

T4: That's right because the question is asking you to share six balloons among two friends (*draws pictures on board to symbolise problem*)

T4: (*Addresses Ahmad*) so now do you see we use division and not multiplication. You are in Year Two now, you should know this; (*addresses whole class*). In fact all of you should know this. I shouldn't have to go through this again and again. Most of you know this but some of you need to practise this a bit more.

Assimilating Young Children into the Dominant Culture

Although, a positive appreciation of the multicultural situation in each classroom was expressed by many of the participants, with one respondent using the words 'amazing' and 'fantastic' to describe her teaching experiences in culturally diverse classrooms (T2), there still seemed to be a shared understanding that there is a neutral, universal way of teaching that is appropriate and effective for every child and which fulfils national curriculum standards. With this 'one size fits all' approach (Schoorman, 2011), the participants seemed to unknowingly feel the need to "save" children and their families from being 'stuck in their own cultures and traditions' (T4) with 'cultural baggage' (T3). As T3 reiterated:

...on Harmony day when the kids come in to school with their cultural dress you feel like you are no longer in Australia. Somehow you are transported to a different country every time you see a different child and the cultural baggage they bring with them is suddenly meaningful and you truly begin to appreciate each atom of diversity that exists within our class (T3)

Teacher 3 also talked about equipping students with values and behaviours that are 'socially appropriate'. This was demonstrated when T3 walked past a Singaporean student and took a look into her lunchbox:

T2: Natassa your noodles look so yum

(*Another student, Bilal walks over to Natassa's lunchbox and makes slurping noises*)

T2: That's enough Bilal, go back to your seat. (*Bilal walks back to his seat*)

T2: (*Turns back to Natassa*) It smells really good but maybe next time you can bring something like a sandwich for lunch. Maybe you can put some chicken or meat, some vegetables and mayonnaise? (*Natassa nods her head*)

T2: (*Walks around the classroom*) See Jay has some egg and lettuce in his sandwich (*continues walking around*) Maryam has... (*looks at Maryam's sandwich*) some tuna, mayonnaise and some lettuce in hers. (*Addresses whole class*) Who else has a sandwich?

(*Students call out and raise their hands to show they have a sandwich*)

T2: (*Addresses Natassa*) You can eat your yummy noodles at home because I know how yummy they are. I love my noodles but when you come to school maybe bring a healthy sandwich; you already have a

cheese stick and some celery sticks so ask your mummy to make you a sandwich ok.

There is no doubt that this advice is given with the best of intentions by teachers who are intent on making life for the ‘other’ less remarkable but there is a failure to recognise the implications of such comments and actions for the children’s cognitive, social, emotional and identity development. As Banks (2006) points out, the issues and challenges of a multicultural classroom go beyond mere conversations about skin, hair and eye colour and involve deeper understandings. Educators working with young children may unintentionally foster biases, by assuming and implying, that there is only one way to live, behave, interact and think (Keeffe & Carrington, 2006). The participants in this early childhood setting have a set of rules, values and behaviours that are deemed necessary for children to develop in order to “thrive” (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). The immigrant backgrounds of some of the participant teachers and their integration into “mainstream” culture has not made them immune to holding biases and prejudices towards cultures other than their own (Keeffe & Carrington, 2006).

Teacher’s Understandings of Responding to Cultural Diversity

The participants used a ‘tourist approach’ (Schoorman, 2011) to learning about different cultures in the lessons observed. They emphasised points of comparison, focusing too narrowly on the “exotic” aspects of culture as seen in this extract taken from a response given by one teacher:

We were learning about Aboriginal culture... we did dot paintings and we looked at pictures of Aboriginal people living in the bush... we also painted the children’s faces. It was funny because one of the kids seemed confused; he told me that he had a neighbour who was Aboriginal and his neighbour didn’t wear “normal” clothes and did not look like the Aboriginals shown in the picture and he asked me “does my neighbour really eat bugs and insects?”... I was just lost for words... I didn’t know what to say... I didn’t realise I was stereotyping a particular group of people... that wasn’t the message I was trying to portray (T3).

As in other studies of this kind (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010), the participants did not appear to have adequate depth of knowledge about the cultures and world views represented; oversimplifying understandings they relayed to the children, fostering stereotypes and a sense of self and other. As one teacher participant added, ‘I have my own culture and I don’t understand much about other people’s culture so the Internet and books are a big help’.

Families: The Cross-Cultural Challenge

Families at this setting have been a neglected resource, mainly, it seems, because the participant teachers have not been given guidance in how to approach the parents of the children in their care. Communication with families tended to be limited, often one-way and asymmetrical; that is the participant teachers advising the families via newsletters and personal letters with no guarantee that the families who received the letters would be able to read and understand them. Language difference was the main concern for the participant teachers but they also worried

about differences in values and attitudes. As one participant confided, she felt like saying to the parents, 'You're in Australia now, you need to be a bit more open to other people's ideas' (T1). Cross-cultural communication focuses on the acceptance of all people, regardless of family functioning, learning styles, behaviours, attitudes and expectations (Kiriakou, 2001) and teachers in Australia can no longer afford to place issues of cross-cultural communication in the "too-hard basket". Despite rhetoric about building home-school partnerships, the reality still sees this goal unfulfilled (Schoorman, 2011).

Conclusions

From the findings and discussion above, there appear to be three main propositions that can be put forward. As in other studies (McInerney, 2003), many early childhood educators in Australia are positive about cultural diversity in the student population but, in practice, are ambivalent towards the student retention of cultural traits and critical of what they see as student "cultural baggage". Teachers do not recognise that aspects of students' "cultural baggage" are unlikely to be dissipated (Keengwe, 2010) and see "cultural baggage" as 'an encumbrance' or a restriction rather than a 'safety net' which can prevent students from falling into insecurity (Louie, 2005, p. 23). There is recurrent 'othering' and a notion that learners are 'stuck in their cultures'; the role of the teacher being to build resilience and enable students to adapt to the new dominant culture. This is even more curious in light of the fact that, in this current study, many early childhood educators came from minority immigrant groups themselves. Of course, the fact that teacher participants were not trained EAL/D teachers, and did not have the competence or confidence to accept responsibility for English language instruction or maintain familial cultures, needs to be taken into consideration.

The second proposition is that teachers are constricted by notions of conformity to the dominant culture and, as Schoorman (2011, p. 341) puts it, 'under pressure to create academic environments that are inherently inhospitable to the increasing diversity'. This sends a "West and the Rest" message with non-Western seen as regressive, 'backwards' and not up to standard.

The third proposition is that there is a pyramid of fear, with government "standards" at the top and managers, teachers, parents and students in culturally diverse settings below. Much of the fear manifests itself in teacher coercion of the students, as one of the teachers in the study said to her EAL/D student, '... there are some other words to practise too but we'll get there slowly won't we?'. There is a preoccupation with conformity to the national curriculum as seen in the teacher comment to a student, '...you are in Year Two now, you should know this...'. This stance shows an inability to attend to Developmentally Appropriate Practice and the lack of time to devote to individual students' social contexts. Failure to meet the standard might reflect badly on teachers, especially those who are the children of migrants.

Recommendations

Although this ethnographic study cannot claim generalisability to other sites it can provoke reflection on dealing with diversity in classroom practice in Australia and provide the impetus for certain recommendations to be made. These recommendations are listed as follows:

- Higher education institutions should promote greater knowledge and critique of multiculturalism in Australia and the needs of culturally diverse children in schools, reminding pre-service teachers that education is a reflection of political motives and can be used for both oppression and liberation (Freire, 2000). Theoretical units of study embedded in education degrees should provide students with a comprehensive understanding of social, political, historical, religious and cultural knowledge of the regions from which their students derive. This is the first step towards moving beyond education focused purely on diversity and towards a greater focus on multiculturalism as social justice (Schoorman & Bogotch, 2010). Opportunities for first-hand engagement with culturally diverse groups of students could also be arranged. Furthermore, given the change of demographics in Australian schools, preparation of teachers for culturally diverse contexts should not be limited to elective units; core units need to be offered to pre-service and in-service teachers to prepare them to teach culturally diverse students.
- Opportunities for the development of meta-cultural sensitivity (Louie, 2005), in which students critically reflect upon “self” and “other”, their own culture, the cultures of the students they are teaching, and the dynamic nature of these cultures, need to be formalised within pre-service and in-service teacher development programmes so as to help teachers better understand their own personal identity, values and customs and how these have shaped them as a person and a teacher. This could be achieved by using the kind of diversity self-assessment instrument devised by Bromley (1998), complemented with core component sessions in university courses or in-house workshops focused on informed critical thinking about dominant cultures, ideologies, belief systems (Expósito & Favela, 2003) and critique of what Apple (2009) calls ‘compliance oriented practices’.
- Forums in which teachers can discuss teacher expectations with students and families need to be incorporated into school curriculum, while, at the same time, opportunities for families to articulate their expectations of teaching and learning and the aspirations they have for their children should be provided by the school. Once expectations on both sides have been identified, teachers and families could discuss the roles they can play in moving children towards discussed targets. A learning journal of family communications, consultations with the teacher and access to translation services, could be part of this communication with families.
- It takes an enormous commitment to work with students and parents from diverse cultural backgrounds (Expósito & Favela, 2003) and teachers in this study were doing their very best with limited resources, inadequate meta-cultural sensitivity education and no experience or qualifications in Teaching English as an Additional Language/ Dialect. Better support for teachers needs to be provided by the Australian government at the micro-level, in particular, in the area of English language tuition for EAL/D students. There needs to be more recognition that shifting demographics necessitate more funding for resources to help teachers deal with the ever-changing needs of culturally-diverse students and their families. These resources should include multilingual translator services, specialised EAL/D teachers (as teaching assistants), professional support personnel and community support networks that can help immigrant families settle into their new communities. Equipping teachers to be ‘border crossers’ who value difference and feel confident in

their cross-cultural skills and knowledge, will also bring about more effective home/school partnerships between teachers and parents (Schoorman, 2011, p. 343).

Final remarks

Australia is experiencing increasing cultural diversity. This fact needs to be recognised and prioritised in pre-service and in-service teacher education courses. Building an inclusive culture in a school community requires teachers to question and critique their own personal and collective beliefs and the values and practices underpinning their teaching. Once this is done, more symmetrical dialogue can then be undertaken between families and educators, with a view to addressing potentially contentious issues. Through informed, productive dialogue and greater government response to resourcing of public schools, teachers can better understand the diverse families with whom they are dealing and arrive at wider perspectives and more appropriate practices. As Kofi Annan (Former Secretary-General of the United Nations) said, 'Diversity is not only the basis for the dialogue among civilizations, but also the reality that makes dialogue necessary' (2000).

Notes on the contributors:

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Appendix 1- Interview questions

1. What does cultural diversity mean to you?
2. How have you built up your knowledge/perceptions of cultural diversity in society? What are the sources of these perceptions?
3. How do you feel about the culturally diverse children in your classroom?
4. How have your feelings influenced the way you respond to your students?
5. What do culturally diverse students bring with them into your classroom?
6. What do you believe culturally diverse children need to have/be equipped with before they enter formal schooling?
7. What do you believe are some of the 'issues' you encounter teaching in a multicultural classroom?
8. How do you respond to these 'issues'?
9. How do you believe culturally diverse students learn best?
10. With a focus on your instructional program, how have you made the learning environment responsive to the needs of culturally diverse children? How do you envisage moving forward?
11. What role do you believe teachers hold in preserving cultural, linguistic and religious differences in the classroom?
12. How important do you think collaboration (with other educators and families) is in responding effectively to cultural diversity in your classroom? Why?