

**The Culturally Diverse Classroom: Challenges for Teacher Education**

**Abstract**

New Zealand's classrooms are becoming more and more culturally diverse. This educational phenomenon is a reflection of the arguably radical cultural transformation that New Zealand society has undergone in recent years. If the rapid social growth in cultural diversity continues, then people from non-European background will be the majority by 2040 (Prestidge 2004). The current reality is that teachers are expected to teach in these culturally diverse classroom contexts and are in many cases not adequately prepared to provide relevant cultural learning spaces for their students. Consequently children who come from minority cultures may be disadvantaged. What follows is a review of literature on education for culturally diverse classrooms, focusing on pre-service teachers' preparation for culturally diverse learning contexts. Common themes and issues from the literature are: Increasingly diverse classrooms; sociocultural competence; the role of self-reflection and self-analysis of culture; radical multiculturalism and cultural proficiency.

**Increasingly diverse classrooms**

The research studies referred to in this review suggest that more and more of today's teachers will encounter learners that are different to each other and different to themselves (Sheets 1999; Santoro & Allard 2005). This development seems particularly pronounced in first world countries like The United States, The United Kingdom, and Australia (Sheets 1999; Santoro & Allard 2005). In the United States, for example, research studies found that '... in the 500 largest school districts in the country, Latinos and African Americans account for 52% of the student population' (Young 2002, cited in Moll 2005, p. 246). New Zealand is no exception to this international trend. According to Prestidge (2004), the rapid acceleration of cultural and linguistic diversity in New Zealand society in general has resulted in schools becoming increasingly culturally complex educational environments and 'until recently the approach of many if not most 'mainstream' schools has been basically monocultural' (p. 16).

In contrast to the above trend teacher populations are becoming increasingly homogenous (Miller and Endo 2005). Consequently, teaching is increasingly becoming a commuter profession since many teachers do not live where they teach, 'especially in the case of schools serving low-income or working-

class students' (Moll 2005, p. 243). According to Newby, Swift & Newby (2000) another trend is that the percentage of teachers of colour will decline to approximately five percent or less by the year 2005.

The research studies identify two responses in dealing with this greater diversification in classrooms. One obvious response points to the need to have a greater diversification of the teaching force (Newby et al 2000; Chamness & Endo 2005). However, Chamness and Endo (2005) are quick to caution that:

research does not conclusively indicate whether the diversification of the teaching force, in and of itself, truly has the impact that is claimed. While there is no doubt that diversification is important this is only part of the solution. (p. 244)

Instead, the research studies respond almost unanimously to the importance of teacher education programmes in preparing all teachers adequately and appropriately for culturally diverse classrooms, irrespective of their social and cultural background (Chamness & Endo 2005; Pullen 2000; Moll 2005; Cooney & Akintude 1999; Sheets 1999; Pierce 2005; Marulis 2000; Bradfield-Kreider 2001; Miller et al 2000). One study cautions that all new teachers will require guidance and support when addressing the needs of their socially, culturally and linguistically diverse students and if they have not been sufficiently prepared in this area, it is possible that they will fall back on their previously held social and cultural misconceptions (Achinstein & Athanases 2005). Cooney and Akintude (1999) add that sustained exposure and dialogue over an extended period of time is what is needed in teacher education and that 'until a multicultural perspective is omnipresent in our culture, there is still much work to be done' (p. 14). The exact form, content, level, shape and status of this multicultural teacher education, however, is what preoccupies much of the research literature and on which there is much contestation.

### **Developing sociocultural competence**

Much of the research literature highlights the need for all pre-service teachers to learn about diversity, the socio-cultural contexts of their learners and to develop a deep understanding and appreciation of its implications for teaching and learning (Cooney & Akintude 1999; Moll 2005; Bradfield-Kreider 2001; Pierce 2005; Sheets 1999; Marulis 2000). Moll (2005) calls this sociocultural competence. He argues that teacher education programmes must develop 'not only technical competence and solid knowledge of subject matter but also sociocultural competence in working with the diversity of students that characterise contemporary schooling' (p. 244).

In pursuit of developing this 'sociocultural competence' in pre-service teachers, a variety of specific educational initiatives have been developed and implemented. One such initiative at a university in the United States took the form of a two day symposium in which predominantly middle-class, white, pre-service teachers were exposed to the experiences of Native-American, Chicano, African-American, Asian-American and economically oppressed students; where they listened to their personal struggles to

succeed (Cooney & Akintude 1999). Another project called PhOLKS (photographs of local knowledge) instructed pre-service teachers out on placement to provide their students with cameras to photograph people and/or things that were important to them in their homes or neighbourhood. Students and family members wrote narratives about each picture. The goal of the project was for the pre-service teachers to see their 'students in contexts other than classrooms and in relation to adults or children in their lives. In so doing, the centrality of social relationships in learning and in developing classroom communities became readily apparent' (Moll 2005, p. 245). A somewhat different initiative involved an education faculty conducting a year-long workshop in transforming the teacher training curriculum to include multicultural issues at a substantive level and not just as add-ons to a pre-existing teacher training programme (Fabrykowski & Price 2001). Similarly critical of the add-on/infusion model approach, another education faculty adopted a more 'immersion approach to cultural issues or knowledge related to diversity'. The goal was for pre-service teachers to learn to appreciate cultural diversity through experience, 'to appreciate it as a reality and not an academic exercise – a reality they experience through interactions with a diverse faculty and student body' (Marulis 2000, p. 32). To this end, the faculty made a conscious attempt at enrolling students of colour and employing staff of colour.

In an attempt to sensitise their predominantly Caucasian and monolingual pre-service teachers to issues of cultural diversity and increase their sociocultural competence, a Californian university introduced a project whereby teacher educators both trained and supported pre-service teachers through curriculum development (Andrews, 2002). This involved linking each pre-service teacher with a culturally diverse classroom and its actual teacher and working alongside the actual teacher in developing culturally relevant and linguistically appropriate resources. A significant part of this project was that pre-service teachers reflected on their experiences and analysed their reflections. This project introduces another of the dominant themes highlighted by the research literature: the personal, reflective journeys of educators in becoming socioculturally competent.

### **The role of self-reflection and self-analysis**

The research literature on the role of self-reflection and self-analysis in teacher education programmes is significant. Reflecting on the special character of the culturally diverse educational environment and making appropriate changes to make learning meaningful for all is crucial (Sheets 1999; Marulis 2000; Calvillo 2003; Cooney & Akintude 1999). Sheets (2003) argues that:

acquiring knowledge of self self-reflection on becoming a multicultural educator – is an important first step. This introspective attitude provides educators with evidence of the personal growth needed to internalize a diversity ideology. (p. 58)

Some emphasise the need for educators to embark on an identity journey of personal preparation and self-knowledge in order to 'become multicultural' themselves - a necessary step before they can 'effectively and authentically' teach in a multicultural environment (Sheets 2003, p. 59). As a pre-requisite to 'becoming multicultural', educators are advised to examine their own cultural assumptions before they can start the journey of cultural transformation and are warned that 'this deep psychological self-analysis is likely to remove teacher candidates out of their comfort zone' (Sheets 2003, p. 59). This warning rings true in another study where pre-service teachers from the dominant culture develop initially defensive and ultimately antagonistic attitudes towards their teacher educator when requested to engage in a deep level of self-analysis about culture and privilege (Cooney & Akintude 1999). This connection of multicultural education to social transformation is taken a step further by Gourd (2000) who argues that a 'conceptual framework to understand, support and promote the personal transformation of White educators' is necessary, as well as a framework 'for understanding stages of White identity development'. Gourd continues that educators from the dominant culture are advised not to become complacent about their level of cultural development, but to continue on a journey of 'critical consciousness' and cultural education since 'they can't teach what they don't know' (p. 48).

A New Zealand-based research project that captured the narratives of secondary school, Maori students, highlighted the different understandings between teachers on the one hand and Maori students on the other in terms of educational outcomes. While teachers externalised the blame for Maori students' underachievement on the students and/or the system, the students located the teacher and classroom environment as the biggest influences on their achievement. Prestidge (2004) argues that this highlights the need for teacher education programmes to prepare 'new teachers to be critically reflective in order to understand their experiences, and exercise responsibility for their own learning and teaching' (p. 20).

Another study that particularly highlighted the powerful impact of self-reflection and analysis was one that required pre-service teachers to 'unpack their invisible knapsacks' (Gallavan 2005) by engaging in directed activities, followed by reflective dialogue in focus groups. Upon reflection the participants gained more insight into the dynamics of privilege and power. The 'white middle class' participants especially were challenged when asked to identify some of their cultural artefacts, 'the students detail how they perceived that they had no culture' (Gallavan 2005, p. 38). They learned that they had a wealth of cultural characteristics that they were unaware of and that only became apparent upon reflection and sharing with others. According to Gallavan (2005) the pre-service teachers began to understand:

not only the historical invisibility of privilege but the ways that privilege continues to function in contemporary schools. Students disclose how they rarely see the world through any lens but their own and the vitality for this exercise in becoming a teacher. (p. 41)

The invisibility of the dominant culture is confirmed in an Australian study where an exercise in self-reflection and self-analysis was required of pre-service teachers. The participants saw themselves as ‘just Australian’, as ‘disappointingly normal’ and ‘free to borrow from other more exotic cultures’ (Santoro & Allard 2005). Many of them expressed surprise at being asked to think about this aspect of their identities. Several of the students indicated that they had not thought of themselves as having a particular ethnic background. In working with the pre-service teachers, Santoro and Allard realised that while the pre-service teachers were capable of reflecting on their own cultures and identities, their reflections:

did not necessarily translate into a deeper or richer understanding of how the world might look from their students’ perspectives, or how systemic discrimination might operate to limit their students’ life choices. Clearly, what is also necessary to help future teachers develop competence in teaching diverse student groups is an examination of how class discrimination and/or racism operate to privilege some positions and silence others. How these discourses are taken up in curriculum, pedagogy and practice need to be understood alongside the ‘personal’ reflections about one’s experiences. (2005, p. 872)

With this comment in mind, radical multiculturalism will be explored as a dominant theme in the literature.

### **Radical Multiculturalism**

Santoro and Allard (2005) pose the question: ‘how can we help student-teachers understand that ethnicity and social class are integral to the identities of both learners and teachers and not just descriptors of non-Anglo-Australians or of non-middle class students?’ (p. 872). They asked this question within the context of a methodological problem that they encountered when doing their research, which was that categories of ethnic difference and of social class were hugely complex, and that there was a danger of reinforcing stereotypes, as happened in their research, when teaching or researching difference. They cautioned that this could happen quite easily, even with the best of intentions.

The nature of the discursive link between culture, ethnicity and identity on the one hand and class, privilege, socio-economic oppression, power and race on the other is what much of the literature explores in an attempt to understand how best to educate pre-service teachers about multiculturalism and diversity. Some of the literature argues that it is crucial that pre-service teachers consciously engage with issues on culture, ethnicity, race, class and socio-economic oppression, if they are to be prepared beyond a superficial understanding of multiculturalism and fully explore the complexities of diversity in education (Hertzog & Adams 2001; Santoro & Allard 2005; Ukpokodu 2002; Miller et al 2000; Sheets 1999; Moss, 2001; Cooney & Akintude 1999; Hampton et al 2003; Solorzano & Yosso 2001). Hertzog and Adams (2001) point out that many multicultural teacher education programmes have been slow in this regard.

Two studies suggest an approach to making multicultural teacher education more comprehensive and in-depth through linking two distinct yet complementary academic disciplines at the course-design and delivery level (Hertzog & Adams 2001; Sheets 1999). One such case links the disciplines of education and anthropology in the form of a Liberal Studies Seminar in Anthropology course for teacher educators (Hertzog & Adams 2001). Key elements of this course are to: 'Have candidates examine their attitudes toward other ethnocultural groups; Teach dynamics of prejudice in the classroom and how to deal with it; Teach candidates about social oppression and economic inequality; Teach candidates about learning styles of various groups and the limitations of this information' (Hertzog & Adams 2001, p. 28). Similarly the link between education and psychology is made by explicitly highlighting and exploring the 'relationship between racial and ethnic identity in human development' (Sheets 1999, p. 47). Sheets explicates that this conceptual union 'brings together scholars from education and psychology to link racial and ethnic identity to human development and school practices' (p. 47).

Some researchers examined the concept of multiculturalism from the perspective of social action and transformation and thereby introduced a more radical form of multicultural and diversity education (Moss 2001; Cooney & Akintude 1999; Hampton, Liguori & Rippberger 2003). 'Education that is Multicultural and Social Reconstructionist is a critical approach to examining the presence of diversity in school and society' (Moss 2001, p. 2). The implication of this is to move 'beyond transmission to translation' and so challenge 'the preparation and practice of teachers' (Moss 2001, p. 2). Moss articulates the need for a 'critical lens' when teaching and learning about diversity, and in so doing not devalue multiculturalism but instead develop a form of critical pedagogy which challenges the way we come to know and think in the classroom (2001). In another study Hampton, Liguori & Rippberger develop the concept of a 'social reconstructionist form of multicultural education' even further. They identify two components of multicultural education. Firstly, it should teach directly and explicitly about political and economic oppression and discrimination, and secondly it should prepare people for social action (2003).

A similar view was articulated in the study by Solorzano and Yosso (2001), albeit from a Critical Race Theory (CRT) perspective. They conclude that a teacher education programme developed from a CRT perspective would 'identify, analyze and transform subtle and overt forms of racism in education in order to transform society' (Solorzano & Yosso 2001, p. 4). The aim of such a programme would be to train pre-service teachers to develop a working knowledge of deficit-based theories in education, identify the use of racial stereotypes in schools and in so doing actively work towards the eradication of the subordination of children of colour, based on racial discrimination. Another study concluded that participants were not able to grasp the deeper levels of institutional, societal and epistemological racism

unless they were made explicit, and therefore recommended that pre-service teachers be explicitly trained to recognise and identify systemic racism (Cooney & Akintude 1999).

## **Cultural Proficiency**

Quezada and Louque introduced the concept of cultural proficiency with the following working definition for the concept:

Cultural proficiency provided individuals and institutions with a framework for systemic change in reflecting an individual's values and behaviours, along with analyzing the policies and practices of the institution. In teacher education, cultural proficiency is demonstrated in many ways, including how education departments support faculty of color, students of color, a multicultural curriculum, and a program that fosters equity (2002, p. 11).

Quezada & Louque (2002) identified five essential elements of cultural proficiency. These elements are that diversity is valued, own culture is assessed, dynamics of difference is managed, cultural knowledge is institutionalised and diversity is institutionalised. These elements formed the basis for a cultural proficiency model which they used to measure the cultural proficiency of a teacher education institution and then located it on a cultural proficiency continuum. The descriptors on the continuum were (from least to most proficient): culturally destructive, culturally incapacitated, culturally blind, culturally pre-competent, culturally competent, and culturally proficient.

At this point it is timely to highlight the insights gained by a study conducted in the United States in 2002. The study documented one teacher education institution's response to the increasing pressures in the United States on teacher education programmes to prepare teachers to work effectively and successfully with diverse student populations. It documented the programme design and the first year of implementation of its 'critical multicultural education' course and articulated the many and varied responses of the pre-service teachers to the form and content of the course. The overwhelming response from the mainly European-American pre-service teachers ranged from a strong feeling of defensiveness to a refusal to engage with some of the content or participate in some of the activities – refusal was often followed by complaints to the head of faculty on the inappropriateness of the course (Ukpokodu 2002). A subsequent evaluation of the course led to many insights/lessons for the teacher educators, one of them was that 'pre-service teachers did not want to be overwhelmed by an overload of information with which they had no prior connection or experience' (Ukpokodu 2002, p. 32). Teacher educators revisited the course and made significant changes to the form of delivery while still maintaining the core content – these changes resulted in a more meaningful learning experience for all concerned. The same lesson is

reiterated by another study where the response of white American students were similarly defensive, and after dialoguing with students, teacher educators confirmed that the experience ‘illustrates how college faculty could begin to challenge students’ thinking by providing them with learning experiences that are within their zones of proximal development’ (Vygotsky 1978, cited in Cooney & Akintude 1999, p. 14).

## Summary

The dominant themes and issues extracted from the literature on education for cultural diversity are: the increasing diversity of classrooms; the need to prepare teachers for this diversity by developing their sociocultural competence; the important role of self-reflection and self-analysis in their own cultural development and the emergence of a radical form of multiculturalism advocating social transformation and political change. While there is substantial contestation on the level, form, content, frequency and status that teacher education programmes for cultural diversity should take, there is an overriding consensus that they are important and that they need to be a part of every teacher education programme. How significant this should be is what is currently being contested in the literature. It is important that current and future research studies continue this conversation to further explore how best tomorrow’s teachers should be prepared for the increasingly culturally diverse classrooms that await them. This research conversation will ultimately benefit the growing number of children who require emotionally safe, culturally affirming, socially relevant, intellectually stimulating and non-alienating learning spaces to succeed. This conversation is becoming increasingly important to New Zealand. Prestidge (2004) argues that ‘we seek to achieve excellence in educating new teachers for culturally complex classrooms. Aotearoa – New Zealand’s increasingly pluralistic society needs them desperately and they have the chance to make a huge difference’ (p. 21).

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