Introduction

At the centre of this research and its outcomes is the role that adult, community education (ACE) organisations play in exploring social and cultural issues while interacting with informal and formal structures and processes of adult learning. Within the milieu of the Shire of Campaspe, a rural area in Australia, there emerged the issue of ‘new’ social diversity because of internal population mobility and international migration to regional areas in Australia. Australian regional communities are growing and diversifying within a complex framework of ecological, economic, historical, social and human factors.

The research activities included surveying and interviewing fifteen adult learners from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds which resulted in the development of vignettes as snapshots of habitual narratives (Redman, 2005; Linde, 2001). There were also focus group meetings with individuals participating in a local cultural diversity support group in the Shire of Campaspe and a focus group with learners in an English-as-a-second-language (ESL) program. There were interviews with adult education staff working with a range of adult education providers, allowing for the compilation of a comprehensive profile of adult education activities in this region.

Context

The Shire of Campaspe, situated in northern Victoria has a population of over 37,000 people that is growing in number and diversity (ABS, 2007; Shire of Campaspe, 2006). Agricultural production based on intensive irrigation is the largest industry in terms of net worth and revenue, dairy farming and dry land farming involving cattle, sheep and grain are the main agricultural industries. Employment occurs mostly in the service sectors of retail, finance, hospitality and tourism. In recent times the Shire has been significantly affected by drought, impacting on economic, social and personal circumstances.

The place that is Campaspe is representative of many regions in Australia where the population is diversifying as more people move from large urban areas and as migrants and refugees are ‘diverted’ into regional areas by government policies. There are also specific patterns of age-specific migration, with different age groups moving out of and into these areas. Older adolescents, for example, show a pattern of movement toward urban centres, mostly for education. These patterns tend to reverse for 25-29 year olds in regional areas such as Campaspe, reflecting the attraction of regional areas for young families and the return mobility of some who have completed their tertiary education (DVC, 2006).

Regional population diversity via migration and internal mobility

Issues of cultural and social marginalization motivate many people and especially newly arrived migrants, to choose to reside in the diversity of urban areas. However, in recent years a number of regional municipalities around Australia have been actively welcoming more diverse groups into their communities for a range of economic and social reasons.
Currently there are immigration programs targeting humanitarian entrants to resettle in regional and rural Australia, skilled migrants can fill skill shortages and there are opportunities for guest workers to come to Australia to fulfill specific employment contracts in regional or rural communities (Broadbent, Cacciattolo and Carpenter, 2006; DOTARS, 2006).

Individuals from culturally diverse backgrounds interviewed for the research came to Campaspe via internal mobility and/or international migration. The mature age individuals who had resided in Australia for a decade or more, mostly in large urban communities, relocated to Campaspe for personal reasons, the lifestyle, their mental health and for some, financial benefit. This mobility reflects individual life transitions facilitated by a number of factors including; relationship breakdowns, the ‘empty nest’ syndrome or physical/mental health issues. These individuals are searching for a sense of ‘place’ and ‘community’, a sense of belonging outside of their prior familial and cultural experiences. This appears to be a function of age-related life transitions as much as CALD background or migration experiences. No longer satisfied or dependent on the same social connections that have sustained them in the past, this group are seeking some meaning to their individual lives rather than solely financial gain or familial stability.

Different motivations and objectives characterised the younger individuals from CALD backgrounds, all women, who had migrated within the past five years or so. These individuals had come to reside in Campaspe because of a personal relationship. Their stories reflect the economic issues of the countries of origin and the search for a ‘better’ life for themselves in a new country. They are not as a rule prepared for the experience(s) of living in Australian regional or rural communities and have often had little choice in their location. Some believe that ‘fate’ brought them to Campaspe.

The most common theme emerging from the experiences of all these individuals was their belief that their backgrounds made them social outsiders within this regional community. They had all experienced social exclusion and difficulty in developing localised, supportive social networks. Australian regional and rural communities have distinct localised cultures in themselves, often White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant (WASP) and rooted in the colonial history of a specific region. New residents to these communities are required as newcomers, to adjust to the mores and codes of local life. However, the closer an individual is to the WASP colonial tradition of Australian communities, the quicker and easier one will develop new social networks, often resulting from participation in existing local networks around activities such as sport, business, and church (Babacan, 2007; Hero, 2007).

The role of adult, community education (ACE) in regional communities

The individuals interviewed for this research had all accessed education and/or training programs at ACE providers in Campaspe in recent years. It is clear that for this group ACE has been accessible in the sense that they can access an ACE centre, enquire about programs, enrol in and then attend a group educational activity. These individuals accessed a diversity of education and training programs, from accredited vocational training to personal development courses. They accessed ACE programs for personal, social and economic reasons with an emphasis on the personal and social.

ACE staff for their part understood that ACE is about access to education and that people participate in programs for personal and social reasons. Campaspe has eight ACE providers with the more established smaller ACE centres servicing specific communities.
The two most recently established providers service specific sub-groups in the Shire, that is, Indigenous people and people with disabilities. These new ACE services have apparently flourished in terms of growth in funding and programs, which reveals that prior to their establishment, these ‘equity’ groups were not having their ACE needs met. Exclusion from ‘traditional’ ACE providers for some sub-groups reflects a history of ACE in Campaspe where the main providers have been targeting and servicing mainstream groups in the community such as: women returning to work, ‘leisure’ programs and/or youth who have not completed secondary school.

It appears then that ACE in Campaspe has been exclusionary for a range of ‘equity’ groups. Although ACE is based on an educational pedagogy of inclusion, the WASP culture of Campaspe has inculcated ACE programming and practices with providers and practitioners not being able to ‘see’ the needs of a range of sub-groups in this regional community. This ‘cultural blindness’ by ACE programming in this regional community appears to result from a range of complex historical, population, social and economic factors.

Diversity in population and culture is only a very recent phenomenon for Campaspe with the local population growing and diversifying mostly in the past fifteen years (ABS: 2007). There has been little leadership within local communities to acknowledge the growing diversity of local populations. The establishment of a cultural diversity ‘support group’ in 2006 is one indication that people from different cultural backgrounds have felt the need to support each other because they are (still) not being included in local social networks and processes.

ACE funding structures have indirectly influenced patterns of provision of adult education to specific groups. Funding is allocated to providers based on targeted funding for specific sub-groups such as the long-term unemployed, women returning to work, people with disabilities, ATSI, people from CALD backgrounds and so on (ACFE, 2006). This has encouraged significant levels of niche provision. It may well be argued that the development in ACE services in this region reflects a diversification of social capital in that population sub-groups are developing ‘their own’ services and networking opportunities (DOTARS, 2006; Giorgas, 2000). It is also clear that these alternative networks are being developed outside or parallel to those of the broader community, and come about because the broader community fails to meet the needs of this target group. CALD groups carving out alternative social and economic networks highlights and reflects a community that is practised in protecting established networks rather than extending and nourishing them by embracing the real growth in diversity of the main communities in this Shire. This research has also suggested that targeting people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds is not a simplistic exercise and that individuals cannot be grouped effectively into a CALD category which fails to take account of their life circumstances (Bowman, 2004). Targeting still requires acknowledgement that this group is not homogenous and that diverse offerings such as English language programs (ESL), general education, vocational training and recreation programs are needed to attract this group (Kearns, 2006). Often, individuals from CALD backgrounds are searching for cultural and social elements to adult education that are less obvious to providers, activities such as programs that promote languages, food, religions and other cultural practices.

The diverse experiences of adult learning at ACE in a regional community

The specific individual experiences of ACE in the Shire of Campaspe revealed some critical factors. The individuals who were interviewed saw their forays into education and training in terms of ‘looking’ at ACE as being a way forward for their transitional social and
educational needs. They went ‘looking’ for transitional programs, activities and a ‘place’ to help sort out ‘where to next’. More often than not, they found that what they were looking for was available but didn’t specifically suit their individual personal circumstances, taking what was offered but aware that it might not meet their needs, ‘filling up’ on the education that was available.

Individuals valued the connectedness that ACE fostered but their use of ACE was sporadic in terms of the types and content of the ACE programs they were accessing. These individuals were not wanting educational ‘pathways’, but the spectrum of education programs to be available, general education, vocational education, public education etc. Most of the surveyed ‘older’ individuals from CALD backgrounds experienced the social connectivity and the development of new social networks that they were looking for, however there was also recognition that it was only some of the programs that achieved these outcomes.

These individuals were more established within Australian society and so were more assertive about their needs and more knowledgeable about how to go about locating resources to match their needs. They reported that some ACE programs had successfully blended social and educational activities mostly because of a specific tutor who fostered social activities as part of their educational program no matter what the content and intended outcome was. It was individuals working within ACE, rather than specific ACE providers, programs or practices who were able to facilitate adult education programs that acknowledged the personal, social and cultural aspects of participants. The integration of experiential learning frameworks appeared very limited within ACE providers in Campaspe which revealed a disconnection from the pedagogical frameworks that are particularly effective with diverse groups of learners.

There was also a disturbing recognition by some of the individuals that ACE ‘didn’t set the standards too high’ for some of their programs. Here it was argued that individual potential was not being reached because learners were seen as being ‘disadvantaged’, meaning that they were undemanding and unchallenging. This reflects an ‘input focussed’ approach to the philosophy and practice of adult education where enrolments and student contact hours weigh strongly in decisions about funding and program provision. Unfortunately, this also may reflect a patronising educational framework that means ‘we shouldn’t’ expect too much of people accessing adult education via ACE providers and programs.

Most of the younger, migrant women interviewed for the research experienced ACE as an extension of their social isolation in a new community. Their experiences of ACE programs reflected an expectation of newly arrived migrants to attend English language classes until they can ‘function ‘properly’, that is, assimilate linguistically. The experiences of these women, who have recently migrated, reinforced Australia as a patriarchal society much like the countries they had migrated from. For these women, men were the people who had power over them whether in their personal lives or experiences of employment or ACE programs. Their experiences as women at ACE reinforced their isolation by mirroring the lack of social interaction with other ACE participants from CALD backgrounds meaning they couldn’t locate others with similar experiences that they could bond and develop networks with. For them, ACE providers were not really any different in terms of attitudes about race, culture and gender; these were the mores of the Campaspe regional community of which ACE is a part.
This group found it difficult to build their social capital as part of their ACE experience because of the lack of social support they had in their personal lives that could act as a catalyst to supporting their venturing into new social network development (Hero, 2007). Social isolation acts as a barrier that can feed on itself. Unless individuals find a place that facilitates social inclusion, it can become self-fulfilling where every individual experience leads to social isolation (Baron, Field and Schuller, 2000). The marginalisation of these women again reflects a history of race, culture and gender in Australian society that despite the ‘multicultural agenda’ of the past three decades emphasises a view of migrants as an economic resource. The totality of the migrant experience and the resources these women bring with them are not highly valued, they could be a valuable resource to the local community if only we knew who they were and what they had to offer.

Building social capital

The link between population diversity, adult education and social capital development is still a tentative and questionable one. Often the link is assumed rather than tested. ACE in Australia does have a mandated role in providing access to education and training but this does not necessarily translate into the building of social capital (Volkoff and Walstab, 2007). The research suggests that ACE providers, programs and practice can actually contribute to social exclusion particularly for people more recently arrived in this country and in regional communities. Adult, community education (ACE) could be more active in developing social capital amongst CALD groups in regional communities only when it starts to recognise the specific groups, families and individuals residing in the communities. This also means actively engaging with people from diverse backgrounds by engaging in all manner of social and economic networks within communities to locate and engage with these groups who are often hidden from the mainstream (Nadarajah, 2004).

This research found that much like any other segment of the population, people from CALD backgrounds want and need a range of adult education and training activities. However, for ACE programs to be truly inclusive, they need to incorporate experiential learning philosophies and practices that engage with all learners, their backgrounds and their current knowledge and skills, all as a base for planning and facilitating new adult education programs (Chappell, Rhodes, Solomon, Tennant and Yates, 2003; Fenwick, 2000).

Race and culture as experiences and indicators have been absent from the social capital ‘thesis’ (Hero, 2007) and there is evidence in this research that social capital development via ACE can be a form of social control and social reproduction in regional communities. ACE does nevertheless have the potential to act as an agent of social networking and therefore social cohesion (Balatti, Black and Falk, 2006). Further research and evidence about social capital development is required from diverse community structures and processes throughout Australian society in both urban and regional settings. Social capital measurement to date has been mainly from WASP, middle class communities and using traditional measures such as church going, volunteering and networking via clubs and associations as social capital indicators. People from lower socio-economic backgrounds or marginal groups on the other hand, tend to utilise public services, community services and sport as their main social networking environments and these connections are not being researched as completely as they could and should be (Hero, 2007).
Conclusion

This paper has explored the main themes emerging from recent research in Australia about the context of adult education and its links to social capital development for people from diverse cultural backgrounds. The research discovered how individuals utilise adult education as a space to explore their own social and cultural isolation. Gender, life-stage and length of time of residence in Australia, all influenced the ACE experiences of the individuals from CALD backgrounds interviewed for this research. Based on its stated philosophical and pedagogical background adult, community education in Australia has a role to play in more actively fostering social interaction for diverse groups because there is evidence that this is where people from diverse backgrounds do ‘search for’ access to personal, social and economic network development (Volkoff and Walstab, 2007; Kearns, 2006). A national Australian adult education philosophy and policy framework could create a shared meaning and purpose to ACE that makes it distinct from other post-compulsory education and with funding frameworks that link funds to individual needs rather than target groups. This would re-orientate ACE providers and practitioners to listen to and ‘see’ those individual and groups experiencing cultural and social inequity, those who are still currently missing out on basic access to a range of personal, social and vocational education programs.

References


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