“Focusing on cultural considerations in teacher and leader practice- will this lead to inclusive schools?”

Murray Fletcher and Lyn Pascoe

University of Waikato

Hamilton

New Zealand

Paper presented at

British Educational Research Association Conference

Edinburgh

September 3-6 2008
Focusing on cultural considerations in teacher and leader practice- will this lead to inclusive schools?

Introduction

For many years educationalists have endeavoured to find ways to ensure that all children in the education system receive quality education that motivates and engages them and provides them with assets that can be used in the future for economic purposes. This has created an interest in “inclusive education”. Vitello and Mithaug, 1998, explain this as the elimination of social exclusion that is a consequence of responses to diversity in race, social class, ethnicity, religion, gender and ability. Kugelmass (2003) recognises common characteristics in schools achieving social inclusion: commitment and belief in inclusive education, differences perceived as a resource, collaborative interactional style, willingness to struggle to sustain practices and that inclusion must be understood as a social/political issue. This paper is the result of a small research study in one particular school, undertaken to further investigate the attributes of leaders and teachers and to determine what school-wide features of the staff at the school could be promoted and enhanced in order to raise the student engagement and achievement. It is our belief that inclusive practice must also be actively cognisant of the parents and school community, listening to, distilling and including appropriate “values” or community characteristics in an overt way.

In New Zealand we are beginning to address the power imbalance that has occurred in our education system. The imbalance has occurred because the dominant Pakeha group, whose western-based funds of knowledge and beliefs have constructed the valid skills and learning for our children, is not the indigenous people of the country. This of itself, would not have been a problem if, at the outset, dialogue had taken place to find an interface. A place where the knowledge, values and strengths of the groups could be addressed and blended and which consequently strengthened the education offered nationally; a place where joint ownership of the knowledge, skills and values could be seen and acknowledged, a place of partnership.

New Zealand is now seeing the result of this educational hegemony. We have a “tail” in our national achievement that is most obvious for Maori and Pacific students, and as a nation we are trying to understand and address the affective issues. PISA\(^1\) data indicates that New Zealand education is high quality but low equity. The shift required for us is to gain both high quality and high equity in our education. Imbalance in education may also play out in imbalance in the job possibilities of people and would seem to result in helping to create a larger low socio-economic group in communities. Such a group tends to create further issues,

\(^1\) PISA Programme for International Student Assessment
inculcating deficit thinking by the majority around populations of people and producing a circle of poverty.

Current research-supported projects in New Zealand are working in schools to develop practices that enable engagement for students, especially Maori and Pacific students, and that challenge the deficit thinking surrounding these students. The Education Ministry is focussed on the need to build and sustain strong and effective school-community partnerships. The focus is on relationship building especially between students and teachers.

Working in this climate where the addressing of cultural issues is of national interest, we recognise that our own world-view (values and beliefs) influences our teaching, learning and leading, informing our non-negotiable and negotiable practices and behaviours. Our teacher training has embedded beliefs around teaching that are consistent with the nationally held vision for our students and the curriculum espouses the competencies that we envisage they will gain throughout their schooling. In our classrooms, supported by school leadership, we organise, manage and relate to others according to our own beliefs and values whilst working within the guidelines of the national requirements. It is here in the classrooms that we began to look for a possible key to the engagement of students.

Our reflections caused us to ponder on the relationships within a classroom. We wondered how much teachers and leaders were aware of and could articulate their own philosophical underpinning beliefs/values; we wondered how much students and teachers knew about and understood each other and whether knowing and empathising could bring engagement; and we wondered whether parents understood the school and classroom practices and felt that their beliefs and values were reflected there for their children. We also wondered whether school staff members were able to articulate their personal and educational beliefs with others in the staff. Alongside this we were interested to find out how leaders in a school could promote a climate where all parties, teachers, students and parents felt understood, valued and respected regardless of ethnicity, religion, socio-economic standing, ability or gender. We had a hunch that if parents and teachers/leaders were able to create a dialogue around the values and beliefs they held and could find an interface where home and school met comfortably, the resultant understanding would enable support, motivation and engagement in school things. Believing that a teacher has both non-negotiable beliefs and negotiable beliefs we queried whether perhaps a teacher could incorporate important values held by the classroom and parent community into the practice in the classroom allowing students recognition of their home values whilst maintaining the non-negotiable components of their own values. We thought an amalgamation of the values and beliefs held by all stakeholders would create for students a place where they and their family were respected and considered and the values were familiar and inevitably this would help to raise student achievement. This amalgamation of values/beliefs could be likened to a laminated piece of timber where the various layers are held together by resinous glue and the resultant product is strong and functional.
When we initiated this thinking we imagined that the “big C” considerations of culture, the obvious displays such as music, dance food etc, could be where the interface was most obvious and the “small c” considerations - the underpinning values and beliefs, may be less consequential. We imagined that perhaps the cultural differences may provide some dissonance with those of the school leaders and teachers and thus be difficult to incorporate into school and classroom practice. We looked at the continuum suggested by Lindsey et al (1999) and had a hunch that there were further steps that would denote a deeper personal connection to the notions we were considering. This lead us to discuss a “cultural continuum” where leaders and teachers ranged from noticing to valuing to accepting to incorporating diversity.

Noticing → valuing → accepting → incorporating.

But we were still unsettled about the outcome “incorporating” and what this might look like and mean for a school community in light of the experiences we had encountered in our work.

We reflected on diversity as a way of being, an ontological position each of us has assumed given our upbringing and childhood learning received from our parents/caregivers, our experiences of life and living that colour our thinking, our training and education and experiences related to our working life that make us who we are. This encouraged us to undertake a small piece of “research” in a school to see if we could come up with something that might explain the way we were feeling. The school selected has a wide range of ethnicities as members of the school family and were seeking ways to make the learning a positive experience for all.

This inquiry sits within the contribution to the research base created by the BES² diverse learners and may contribute to an understanding of the ‘shifts in practice’ required both within the classroom, (teacher-student) and the team/school-wide situation, (teacher-leader) that will develop a ‘hybrid’ culture (Trumbull et al 2005) where aspects of everyone’s culture are valued, respected and utilized.

This frame is informed by several propositions:

- We all have our own personal cultural funds of knowledge - the blueprint or all the information that creates how we are in, and how we view, the world. These funds of knowledge are created by ethnicity, religion, political beliefs, socio-economic situations and gender.

---

² B E S B e s t E v i d e n c e S y n t h e s i s Q u a l i t y T e a c h i n g f o r D i v e r s e S t u d e n t s i n s c h o o l i n g
Our world view (values and beliefs) influence our approach to teaching/learning and leading- informs our negotiable/non-negotiable practices/behaviours.

New Zealanders hold a western-based world view, developed by Pakeha. It converges with our personal world view impinging on those who differ. National teacher development and educational resources are western-based.

The ‘border’ where national and personal world views converge may create power imbalances. These impinge on the achievement of students whose world view is significantly different from the nationally held one.

Dissonance engendered by these propositions based on understanding our current positioning and existing conceptual frameworks will challenge our belief system and ultimately lead to shifts in practice.

The conglomerate of the shifts in practice will produce a ‘hybrid’ culture where the combined values of all educators and learners can be recognized as significant.

Methodology:

This research focused on a single case study- one school site. Within this case study two methods for gathering data were used. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected participants and a general on-line survey was conducted with ‘professionals’ and governors within the school community. Interviews were conducted with a classroom teacher-and a sample of children in their care and the parents/carers of these selected children- a possible sample of eleven participants. Interviews were also conducted with the ‘lead teacher’ supporting the classroom teacher and the three senior leaders within the school who formed a senior management team- a set sample of four participants. The on-line survey, with which participants were invited to complete, was anonymous. The participants selected for interview were, in the case of the leaders, self-selected because of their role with in the school. The teacher was chosen because of the diversity of ethnic backgrounds within their classroom and the relationships demonstrated in observed practice. The children were selected in consultation with the class teacher based on this diversity as were the parents.

Ethical approval was sought prior to meeting with participants. Consideration was given to how we would approach and involve all participants in terms of ‘checking’ their ‘stories’ after interviews by presenting a summary of key ideas to each participants for reviewing. Consideration was also given to interviewing children and to interviewing parents and carers.
of differing ethnic backgrounds. A concern for us was whether using English as a common language of communication may have been an issue. Participants were selected with this in mind. The interviews were recorded and researcher notes taken following the interviews if necessary.

The online survey was designed to be conducted with all personnel employed on the school site and also with the trustees or governors of the school. This was set up electronically for ease of access and presented us with a small sample of views focused on each person’s own culture- what they valued; how they saw the cultures of others and how these ideas were reflected in daily life in the school and classrooms.

In this case study we set out to ‘capture’ the individual stories of participants in order to develop an understanding of each participant’s world view and the meaning and purpose they attributed to their stories. We set out to ‘see what emerged’ from the stories in the context of this particular case. In these terms we were operating in an ‘interpretivist’ paradigm (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2007).

Grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) was used as our approach to developing a theoretical understanding from the recorded data. We were seeking to build a theory from the data and not set out to ‘prove’ any existing theories. We also wished to have a theoretical construct that could be understood by the participants in the study as ‘lay persons’. Our approach ( Strauss and Corbin 1994) was to collect the data, take notes as interviewers, look for possible codes within the data, make memos of possible theoretical ideas emerging, sort out these ideas and write these as possible ‘models ‘ to clarify our thinking.

We devised a set of similar questions for each of the groups to be interviewed. All groups were asked about personal culture and how this is reflected in daily life. Teachers and leaders were asked about their teaching platform or philosophy, what they believe underpinned these beliefs and what was non negotiable for them in their practice. They were also asked about their beliefs about the cultures represented in the school or classroom, how these were reflected in practice and the importance of parents to education. They were asked whether they felt they could incorporate negotiated values of parents and students into the school/classroom. Parents were asked whether they saw their important values reflected in
the school and what they might like to include to make this more comfortable for them and their children. They were asked for their thoughts about education and its value and what they felt was important for their child to learn. They were asked how comfortable they were coming to school and whether they felt they could interact freely with teachers or leaders and whether they felt they could contribute to the school community in a way they did not already do. Students were asked what they liked about school and their teacher, what may make school a better place for them and what the teacher might do to make it easier for them in the classroom. They were asked about other languages they might speak or understand and about their friends and their activities.

There were limitations to the student interviews. They were dependent on parent approval, they were limited by the age of the selected students and in some cases, students’ ability to answer questions was limited their unfamiliarity with the interviewer.

Of the five parents selected, three from different ethnic groups were interviewed, one had a child go to hospital and so was not available at the time and one has yet to be interviewed.

Parents were positive about the experience and enjoyed being heard in this way.

The teacher and leaders also commented positively about the experience and indicated their interest in hearing the outcomes of the research to see if ideas might be implemented as a way forward for the school.

We have found that some of the questions we asked were not as useful as we had hoped but the nature of semi structured interviews allowed us to try to surface some of the emerging thinking.

There have been new questions arise from the interviews as we analyse and reflect upon the responses. This research is not yet completed so there will be opportunity to clarify and extend the thinking around some aspects of what appears to be emerging.

**Capturing the voices:**

*The leaders:*

“Relationships are key- very, very important- need continuous maintenance with staff, children, and parents.”

“We need to be transparent and welcoming- the educative centre-hub- with preschool and college.”
“Each culture- Maori- Islander has a special way of going about building this relationship. Maori in particular, have to know how to form/get alongside/build confidence/respect.”

“School values underpin what we do. People need to be aware of school values and these are reflected in the home as well.”

“We need to be sensitive to others and their values.”

“Being trusted and valued are key.”

“Being transparent in all we do is important- no hidden surprises.”

“Respecting parents’ viewpoint is important.”

“Going out of the way to make contact.”

“I like to think I do not judge others.”

“I like to be tolerant of others’ views.”

“We are like a family here at school.”

“I value being who I am.”

“What we stand for- standard values and expectations.”

_The teacher:_

“Personal relationships are really important- I say it’s relationships that let you manage children. If they know that you care for them, that you respect them and are there to have fun as well.”

“It’s the way that we care for each other; the skills that you need to interact and communicate.”

“I value caring for neighbours and others, sharing manners, looking after each other, celebrating and enjoying diversity and being involved, learning some of that culture as well”. 

“They will take away from my room that if you want to get something you need to give something of yourself”

“You care for people, interact, ask nicely, respect them and they will give it back to you”

“Have fun, you’ve got to get your work done but you can do both”.

“I am keen to learn from them as well. Last night at parent interviews I said that I was going to try some words. I said their child had been teaching me. They laughed and said that was good”.

_The Parents:_

_Pacific:_
“Respect and responsibility for yourself.”
“The main thing in our culture is respect to adult people, the younger respect the elders. Show your manners, that’s our respect.”
“I want my children to get more education, encourage children to go to school, until they finish then go to university. I work hard for my children.”
“School is very good. The teacher’s help- the family is happy. Teacher is very helpful for children. The way teachers teach here is very different.”
“We value respect, major, respect to us, the teacher and the whole school. We still respect the elders.”
Very important is manners and integrity, we reflect this in our family.”

Pakeha.
“Major respect for other people, decisions and consequences of actions.”
“We can see respect coming from the Principal, he doesn’t take any rubbish- parents respect him. We see our values reflected in the school. It goes from the top and filters down.”
“It’s very important to be educated in this day and age. We want our children to go to university.”
“Teacher has made a huge difference- he (our child) has got more confidence. He loves him to bits!”
“I talk to the teacher two or three times a week. It’s very important to see that Mum and Dad care about what they’re doing.”
“Seeing how classes are taught now would help us to understand.”
The teachers are very welcoming to people coming to the school.”

Pacific.
“Education is really important for parents and children.”
“I was happy for this primary school. They are very happy to bring every culture –where they are coming from and who they are belong to.”
“Happy for our kids to come here- it’s very different from Tonga.”
“We need to support them so that they know they are still Tongan.”
“We value education and culture for respect- parents respect kids- kids respect parents even the brothers and sisters”
“We keep our Sabbath- no work, no school- just go to church and come home to rest”
“When I call and let the school know they are happy for the kids to go to cultural events”
“I have to help and support my kids to be good- I am happy to come to school”
“I was happy to hear the teacher said S… teaches me Tongan words. So he says “I say it” and I say “Good, thank you she help you!”
“It really helps that they support our culture” (Tongan Dance Group)

**Interpretations:**

On reviewing the interview data we began to see some common factors emerging. There appeared to be a significant theme around how participants viewed the ‘place’ of ‘the other’ in understanding their identity, their place in the world and also in leading and teaching. We could see distinct strands beginning to emerge in the responses we were listening to.

For the leadership team two viewpoints were evident. One was ‘ensuring parents and students know what the school valued and stood for so that they could be assimilated into these set values or norms’. They were a big family under the leadership of a team; all were included and respected as members. “School values underpin what we do. People need to be aware of school values and these are reflected in the home as well”

Another viewpoint was that parents and students brought something that the school should be listening to and perhaps incorporating into its ‘culture’. The notions of the school facilitating “cultural” elements or features, aspects of the big “C” of culture were envisaged and regarded as cultural inclusion. “We need to celebrate ALL children and their cultures”

For some participants ‘tolerance’ was a term used to describe the relationships within the school culture. “I like to be tolerant of other’s views”

On reflection this could indicate “them and us” thinking, putting up with things in order to achieve the desired outcome as the school sees it rather than interrogating the tensions causing the need to tolerate and negotiating an agreed way of moving forward. Tolerance may be seen as paternalistic; we lead this community but for this issue we will acquiesce, pick our battles. If difference were ‘natural’ there would be no need for tolerance.

For some there seemed to be an element of fear, apprehension or uncertainty in their relating to those from differing cultures. The language issues, the religious differences, the lifestyles; there seemed to be no way that all cultures could agree and move forward towards achieving the goal of excellence for their students. Creating dialogue with parents might open a can of worms that would be hard to manage and where no one would win.

Another participant stated that their background caused them to believe that “People are different but that doesn’t make them bad or less or better or anything. People are just
different and that’s what you enjoy about them”. This person believed that caring, sharing social skills, manners, looking after one another, learning together, celebrating and enjoying diversity and creating relationships built on these characteristics tempered by having fun were the fundamental factors of inclusion that lead to educational success.

This lead us to consider the factors that may be powerful aspects of a highly effective school, classroom and community where all participants feel a sense of belonging, security and motivation to be the best learner that they can be.

The parents all commented on the friendliness of the leadership team and the teacher. They all agreed that they were comfortable to come to the school for any purpose despite their cultural experiences in their home countries having been that school was the territory of the teachers. They believed that the school staff respected them and their children although they were not aware of the values espoused by the school, one of which is respect. They valued the school’s inclusion of cultural activities that raised their children’s status in the school and enhanced their self esteem. However the recurring dialogue revolved around the human characteristics that are basic to all people living in communities. This is where there was total synthesis. The values of respect and caring were crucial to their thinking.

Our reflections on this data made evident two overarching concepts important for teachers and school communities. These were:

- **Having a belief platform**, including personal and educational beliefs, that can be articulated and that underpins and is evident in our practice.
- **Making overt the values and beliefs that are non negotiable in our practice**—to other members of staff, students and parents.

Being secure in one’s own beliefs and knowing what one values as an individual seemed to be a key aspect of being with others who may have a different set of beliefs and who may value things differently. This focus on knowing one’s beliefs seemed integral to how one could ‘be’ with oneself and also ‘be’ with another.

Emerging from this thinking was the notion of how one developed a ‘set of personal beliefs’. This we labelled the ‘vortex of life’ (see appendix one). It has both an internal and an external direction following the pathway of life. The external path is characterised by influences such as family- parents/carers, early year’s educators and educators and mentors throughout life as well as social contexts. Religion is offered as an external influence in relation to forming a ‘life view’ but also as an internal one.

The internal path, which may be influenced by religious beliefs, is characterised by inner wisdom, how one chooses to be, how one can be with self and how well one knows self. All of these factors are self- debated, accepted or disposed of as a result of the external factors in which we are located.
A key aspect here seems to be the ‘non-negotiables’ each person possesses- the aspects that will not be ‘given up’ or that are not ‘up for negotiation’-the core of self.

Out of this vortex, containing one’s beliefs, one’s inner self and one’s non negotiable ‘values’ emerge the human characteristics common to all persons and for each person- their ontological platform.

We think that when a teacher/leader is secure with their ontological platform they will be in position to articulate their beliefs and values and negotiate an agreed position with other school community members- parents, colleagues, children- within the school and classroom.

Such negotiations will acknowledge parents as contributors and participants to the ‘schools way of being’. Reciprocity and sharing of ideas and values will lead to an overt, shared, ontological platform for the school community which acknowledges and includes all voices.

**Theoretical Framework:**

![Diagram of theoretical framework]

*We originally thought* (fig.1)

*We now think* (fig.2)

What is emerging that seems important to us is the need to understand and acknowledge one’s own ontological platform in order to create a ‘space’ where difference is considered ‘unconsciously natural’. We previously considered that the pathway to inclusiveness in a classroom or school followed the steps- noticing- valuing- accepting- incorporating. These were actions which considered the culture of others.
We now think that knowing yourself is a vital step in creating inclusiveness. This entails sorting-distilling and making overt what is personally important, the happenings of one’s living, before blending these ideas, coalescing them with those of others and enacting these. (see appendices) This brings us closer to a state of ‘unconscious acceptance of diversity’ making it just a part of the way we are.

The overarching features of this framework are that education requires equity of outcomes at both school and system level. In a New Zealand context we are encouraged to see this as ‘presence’ – students attend school consistently at all available levels- as ‘engagement’- where students find relevance and meaning in their learning and in ‘achievement’- high achievement as an indication of success. In order to meet the needs of the 21st Century learner New Zealand, like many countries, has revised its curriculum and teachers are being encouraged to make a pedagogical shift to one of being partners in learning with students. A requirement of the curriculum is that students will learn about their own values –and express these- and also about the values of others –exploring these with empathy.

For us it seems important that as a ‘shift’, educators at both systems and school level, consider and articulate their deeply held values and beliefs. This articulation will enable them to make values and beliefs overt prior to ‘negotiating’ and ‘blending’ these with those of others in the educative community. This may involve a redefining of one’s personal epistemology. We assumed that we were looking for a ‘shift in practice’ – a set of ‘doings’ that educators could adopt. Instead we seemed to have noticed a ‘way of being’ that is essential to inclusiveness for educators.

We maintain that the term ‘cultural proficiency’ is suggestive of ‘ranked, observable traits of measurable action’ (Lindsey, Robins and Terrell 1999). We also maintain that the term cultural inclusiveness is another step on that continuum; a way of seeing but not of being. We understand cultural inclusion as a way of thinking about and including the disparate world views with which we are confronted. We believe that there is a further pathway which has universal, humanistic and ontological features which become part of our epistemology. It is a state of being. So for us then, we offer this possibility. We think that as one acknowledges values, accepts and includes aspects of life experiences, of our own and of others, they may become part of one’s being. As we each negotiate these beliefs and values, those “common human characteristics” coalesce and become our way of being, our ontological platform. Our different ways of viewing the world may simply become an aspect of “the norm”; a cultural inclusiveness that is an ontological component of each of us. Whilst acknowledging difference, the major human characteristics that motivate all, create the even playing field upon which our human activities may take place.
References:


Vortex of Life

**Internal**
- Religious beliefs
- Inner wisdom
- How/who I choose to be

Knowing self; being with self.
- How I choose to be with others
- Inner wisdom I select to exemplify
- Religious beliefs I select to exemplify/practice.

**External**
- Social Influences
  - Parents – whanau
  - Culture
  - Religion
  - Early year’s educators
  - Other educators/mentors

**Path of life**

**Mindscape**
- Inner self
- Non-negotiables
- Beliefs

Common Human characteristics filtered by culture

**Ontological platform**

**Landscape**
- Inner self
- Non-negotiables
- Beliefs

Common Human characteristics filtered by culture

**The observed persona**

Fletcher and Pascoe (2008)