

### **Multicultural or Eurocentric?**

My own schooling had been Eurocentric, my background was European and my tertiary studies were based on European, American and white Australian 'dead, white, male' artists.

Our school is a very multicultural school in an outer suburban region. Vietnamese and Cambodian families have made this area their home over the past twenty years, and a strong community has evolved.

Until three years ago, racial harmony had been the norm in our community. Then a serious incident occurred. For me, that upheaval was the catalyst for significant curriculum reform.

Initially, I was incensed at the disruption that the incident caused for our school, the untrue claims and the way in which prejudice was fuelled. I began to think more deeply about prejudice. I reflected on and, for the first time, really questioned my own values and beliefs.

Was I providing learning opportunities that built on the diverse cultural understandings of students in my classes? I realised that even though many of my students were of Asian background, what I taught was predominantly Eurocentric.

In reality, I knew very little about my students' cultural identity their history, religion, language and arts. There was a gap in my own understanding of a major part of the world's geography and history, despite Australia's close proximity to Asia and my pivotal role in the learning journey for my Asian students.

That disruptive incident was an awakening for me. I now recognise that my students have rich cultural backgrounds that we can explore in developing curriculum that connects to their experiences, interests and enthusiasms.

Adapted from McRae (2001)

Cultural competency means becoming aware of the cultural differences that exist—appreciating and having an understanding of those differences and accepting them and being prepared to guard against accepting your own behaviours, beliefs and actions as the norm.

Dominant culture behaviour is 'unthinking behaviour' because the dominant culture prevails.

Members of the dominant culture are granted automatic presumption of innocence, worthiness and competence.

# **Key actions: Teachers**

- Genuinely acknowledge the personal significance of my students' contexts. cultures and aspirations
- Recognise learner interest is both what the students bring through the door and what is generated in the classroom
- Support students to know themselves and their passions and strengths as learners
- Focus on essential questions and big ideas that inspire students
- Listen open-mindedly to students' perspectives, and encourage discussion to help explore reasons for differing views
- Pose guiding questions that lead students to view familiar topics in more complex
- Create space in the program where students can investigate and share their learning interests

- Identify and develop topics that demonstrate relevance to life beyond the classroom
- Encourage students to connect learning with issues of personal, local or national significance
- Use contemporary technologies (eg pod casts, social networking websites) in meaningful ways
- Actively seek opportunities for linking the community with programming and planning
- Enrich learning by ensuring a range of purposes and community audiences for students' work
- Create opportunities to involve families in ways that acknowledge and support their contexts, cultures and aspirations for their children
- Value individual self-expression and capitalise on students' unique strengths to convey their meaning

# Key actions: Students

- O Understand we're all different and say what's important to me
- Listen to my classmates and try to understand their views
- Be confident to talk about my hopes and dreams, fears and concerns
- Link my classroom learning to the things I do at home
- Use technology skills to help my learning
- Understand that learning happens everywhere, not just at school, and try new activities in the community

When students are

of the content.

# Access programs and connect students with

Justice alert

questioned?

Whose goals are seen as legitimate and whose are

Ways to connect

learning to students'

lives and aspirations

Community-based learning:

people/organisations that promote lifestyle choices, community involvement, and career and job opportunities. Make connections with role models in the local and wider community.

Have a qo: Talk with students about their interests, and link with community groups and sporting clubs. Plan 'have a go' sessions for some of the identified activities. Encourage students to seek out more of these opportunities. Support them to make contacts and coordinate new sessions.

Student leadership: Promote SRC/forums/committees and student governance as important vehicles for all students to have a say when issues arise. Facilitate activities where all students can have levels of leadership in their class, school and community. Use current issues for students to take a lead role in change, and be flexible in programming to capitalise on emerging learning opportunities.

#### Strengthening aspirations:

Support programs where students are able to visit workplaces and/or have first hand experience in the workforce (eg work experience).

Invite visiting speakers from allied health professions, volunteer organisations and education institutions. Engage in follow-up activities, such as Driver Education programs for secondary students. Integrate these into the subject offerings. For example, liaise with community representatives for sessions on vehicle maintenance/insurance/drivers' legal obligations.

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able to use their own cultural information and experiences to connect to academic lessons, they develop a deeper understanding

 After students have practised a thinking skill or other skill, ask, 'Where might you use this or adapt it? Let's brainstorm. Be creative.' List ideas and discuss some.

remote from the learning context. For example:

 After teaching students about velocity, ask, 'Who may use this knowledge?' (eg crash investigator, town planner, bridge architect, boat builder, building demolition expert), 'When may they use this knowledge?' (eg to work out the speed of cars and impact after a crash, to establish gradients).

#### How does this fit with me?:

After establishing a new learning topic, ask students to individually complete questions that make the topic more pertinent:

- How can I use this at home/in my life outside of school?
- How do other groups or cultures use this knowledge, skill, strategy?
- O How might I use this in the future?
- Is this learning important to me? Why? Why not?
- $\,\circ\,$  What do I want to know about this? Why?

#### Play The Connection Cube:

The Connection Cube is an interactive thinking game on the Active Learning Practice for Schools (ALPS) website.

The Connection Cube can be accessed at <a href="http://learnweb.harvard.edu/alps/thinking">http://learnweb.harvard.edu/alps/thinking</a>>.



# Language that teachers can use to connect learning to students' lives and aspirations

- How can we use your strengths and enthusiasm to make your school learning really meaningful for you?
- When you watched that program, how did it connect to your life?
- Who might see this differently?
- You're on the computer all the time at home. Let's use your IT skills to get the most out of this learning task. Any new ideas?
- What do you hope for your future?
- Are there extra skills you think you need?
   How can we support you?
- How can you use this learning in other ways?
- There are community agencies that may be able to help you with this issue?
   Do you know how to get in touch?

# This element is not demonstrated if:

- Teachers fail to consider their students' and their families' needs/interests and enthusiasms when planning for learning
- A monocultural perspective prevails in the classroom
- Racist, sexist, ageist and class conscious comments and perspectives are expressed and not challenged
- Teachers predominantly teach and value only traditional print literacies from the pre-digital world
- Teachers avoid engaging in conversation with students about current, complex social issues

## Practice check

- Have I created an environment where students feel comfortable in sharing their families' stories, rituals and traditions?
- O Do I know what my students aspire to?
- What links can I make with the community to broaden my students' opportunities and encourage their aspirations?
- O Do students feel safe to disagree with each other and me?
- In my classroom, do I make the most of each student's individuality?
- Do I listen to students' perspectives and pick up on their knowledge?

When a teacher is familiar
with aspects of a child's culture,
then the teacher may be better able to
assess the child's competence. Many
teachers, unfamiliar with the language, the
metaphors, or the environments of the children
they teach, may easily underestimate the
children's competence.





Notes: