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## 1.0 Statement and Position

*“Many Australian learnscapes are very culturally and demographically diverse.”*

Although overt, explicit racism and cultural exclusion are no longer present in the Australian culture at large, culture and ethnicity still remain one of the primary signifiers of difference “...the notion of difference and associated claims of incompatibility are now expressed in cultural and increasingly religious terms” (as cited in Tait, 2016). In response to this issue and in order to teach to a better future social condition of our country and our world, I am fully persuaded that students need more values education rather than one-size-fits-all form of instructional knowledge about ethnicity. Sound values education will enable students and schools to resist racism and exclusion of any form as well effectively cater for the needs of cultural diversity.

Some educational experts argue that the work of education is overly “...concerned with forming and informing students’ sense of Australian-ness as their national identity...” (as cited in Allen, 2004, p. 200). Others state that education is limiting students to mere “...learning to the reproduction of available knowledge thus creating a ‘biscuit-factory’ model of learning...” (Allen, 2004, p. 206) about culture, ethnicity and multilingualism. The question is, what does it mean to be an Australian in today’s social make-up of our nation and based on that, what type of every-day classroom practice should teachers employ to effectively teach to the diverse, multicultural, multilingual students in our classrooms?

This paper is approached through the problem based learning framework and will discuss this issue through the lens of the two items of realia from two private Christian schools in urban Brisbane region, compare and contrast the contexts and propose strategies that will cater for the needs of students from culturally diverse backgrounds. All peoples must be treated as equal despite the differences. The Bible clearly says that there is no Greek or Hebrew, free or slave, male or female before God but that all people are equal to Him (NIV Study Bible, 2007).

## 2.0 Connection and Analysis

To be an Australian in the current social and cultural climate of our nation, in my opinion, means to be acceptant of different people groups and their languages, cultures and religions, respectful of the laws and social processes of Australian Government and appreciative of overall free and liberal way of life Australia as a country offers. Many families from various parts of the world have been and still are resettling in Australia. This is due to the various types of global movements such as personal, business, refugee or other political and similar reasons. Schools claim to be, and most are, welcoming and accepting of students from any background. Students themselves are mostly acceptant of each other however, there have been cases of fights and

clashes between high-school students grounded on ethnic and cultural differences. One such example is a fight between the Lebanese and the Greek students in the New South Wales (NSW) State High School of Cronulla (Paul Rumble, Lecture, Week 1, CR404, Curriculum, Philosophy and Pedagogy for the Middle Years CHC, July 25, 2016). However, this is a rare occurrence in Australian schools.

I strongly believe that catering for a cultural diversity of all students is more of a matter of the hidden curriculum. Functionalist view of schooling and the school's role in passing-on of the societal norms and values to the new generations remains very much unchanged. Students are still being taught the same values as decades ago with an occasional addition of the new 'hot topics' such as tolerance or sexual discrimination. As valuable as it is to have these issues addressed at schools, it could be creating more pressure for the teachers who are already dealing with an overcrowded curriculum and are generally quite time-poor (Foster & Harman, 1992). The curriculum content itself is concerned with the specific knowledge, understanding and the skills related to each specific learning area, therefore, there is no place for values teaching within it unless they are particularly relevant. A perfect example of the hidden curriculum taught through all subject areas with a strong potential to affectively address the issues of society are the general capabilities, in particular, personal and social capability and intercultural understanding. How are the teachers using this culturally responsive curriculum to respond to and address the needs of students from culturally diverse backgrounds?

### **3.0 Research and Contextualisation**

One example of this teacher response in the classroom is, I believe, the assessment task as it provides an excellent opportunity for the students to express themselves, their culture and values. As an example, the Visual Art assessment created for Yr. 11 students at the Brisbane Christian College (BCC) will be compared to the Visual Art assessment created for the same year level at the Citipointe Christian College (CCC) (See Appendix A). Both schools place great value on their students, the students' mental and emotional wellbeing and their ethnicity and cultural backgrounds (BCC Webpage, 2016 & CCC Webpage, 2016). The BCC school's assessment is titled 'Journeys' and it revolves around the students' personal life journeys and experiences. Students are free to choose any concept within any of the contexts which, in Visual Arts are historical, socio-cultural, political and personal. Basically, students are free to create a making piece of their choice on any topic they feel connection to. Similarly, the CCC's assessment task titled 'Our Stories', could be created around any concept within any context in any student chosen media. Again, students are free to create a making piece about anything they feel connection to. Although very similar, BCC's assessment

provides more opportunity for an expression of cultural diversity than the CCC's assessment. This is evident in the assessment task wording which invites students to create an artwork about themselves and their life experiences and make an oral or a video presentation. Both schools enrol students who (or whose parents) are not necessarily of the Christian faith background and they both enrol students from various cultural backgrounds. An assessment piece crafted around personal, life and socio-cultural backgrounds seems to be a great way to celebrate and promote cultural diversity and in a way, it does do that. But how effectively and is it enough?

#### **4.0 Strategies and Recommendations**



I believe there are many strategies teachers can utilise in order to teach to the cultural diversity in their classrooms. The teacher can use the oral presentation of the assessment task to comment on issues students present, elaborate on them and create an open discussion style presentation. At the time of the assessment submission, students are required to provide an artist statement and an oral explanation talking about their artwork, why they created it and what it means to them. Based on this, apart from an open-ended assessment as described, classroom discussions are a great place for learning and exchanging opinions. In addition, the teachers can help the students identify not only the differences but also the similarities found in diverse cultures. In my view, the positive identification of difference creates a basis for the development of an effective communication, relationship building and the productive instructional strategies. For example, at the end of the term when most teaching and assessment is done, a teacher can organise activities where students are asked to write a short statement about someone from a different cultural background in their classroom or school. In addition, creating 'student interviews' where the teachers gets an opportunity to find out about the students' lives outside school enables the teacher to create more relevant lessons. Students can be invited to bring an item of a cultural value or food items to share and talk about during the time of, to them, culturally significant holidays. If students do not wish to participate, which can be the case at the adolescent age, the class as a whole, just before the lesson ends, could find the event details on-line and read about it together. Detailed calendars of religious and cultural events from all over the world are easily available both on-line and in hard copy. A part of the sound values education of students can be teaching them to match their behaviours to the setting they are in. We all adjust our behaviours to the setting we are in and school should be no different. In practical terms this would mean teaching all students to switch to the attitude of respect and tolerance as they walk out of their homes every morning. Biblically, we are to teach our children toward the way they are supposed to walk in and the word of God promises that they will not depart

from it in their old age (NIV Study Bible, 2007). Practicing different behaviour on a daily basis does help an individual to create new habits.

Another effective strategy could be creating learning goals within the lesson plans that consider students' cultures and language skills when developing learning objectives and instructional activities. For example, the described assessment task for Visual Art could have an extension task where students are required to show, formatively and as a concept only, how would someone from an Indian or European background respond to the question. This would prompt students to research and learn about that particular culture. For think pair share style activities, the teacher could deliberately join students from different cultural backgrounds and ask them to justify their answers. Students will be able to learn about interdependent work and different views and perspectives through these set-ups which are not only a valuable life skill but also a requirement of the 21<sup>st</sup> century learners and citizens (Burnette, 2016). The Bible states that students are what their teacher is which is a very strong statement as it suggests that students become the kind of a person their teachers are (NIV Study Bible, 2007). This influence is near immeasurable and must be approached carefully.

### **5.0 Implementation and Effect**

It is important to note that, after starting school in Australia, the common practice for immigrant students seems to be an immediate immersion in learning English language through various subject areas or mainstreaming as well as attending the English Second Language (ESL) classes. It is very difficult for students to learn a foreign language by the instruction being delivered in that very language. Many ESL students struggle to understand the content taught in English, when they cannot speak or understand a word of the language. Therefore, even though students may have the knowledge and understanding of the content, they would not be graded as competent simply because they are unable to express what they know. I believe ESL students are mainstreamed too soon and before they understand the essential basics of English Language. Perhaps a practical solution to this problem would be 'assigning' the ESL student to a peer group of two to three other students who would work with them on class tasks and activities, assignment questions and similar. This would provide the ESL student with a support 'network' and help them not feel isolated. In return, the other students would have an opportunity to discuss and learn about the culture, beliefs and values of the ESL student. Deeper learning takes place when that learning is made personable or in this case, connected with another student. In other words, it is no longer mere learning *about* a culture; it becomes the learning *of* the culture personified by another human being, in this case the student.

In terms of the Visual Art assessment, as a teacher I would include an instruction in the assessment guide that explicitly invites students to approach the topic from the perspective of their cultural background. The instruction would not be prescriptive but open ended enough for students to create and represent what they feel comfortable about. Doing this would create a perfect platform for further building of the values education resulting in the students learning to respect and appreciate others. However, it is important to note that this kind of education does not depend on schools alone but on the values taught at home too.

## **6.0 Conclusion**

*“Many Australian learnscapes are very culturally and demographically diverse.”* Students need more of a values education rather than one-size-fits-all form of instructional knowledge about ethnicity and different cultures. Cultural diversity pedagogies are words that signify “...complex theoretical ensembles with which the teachers grapple with on a day-to-day basis...” in order to achieve an effective practice and an inclusive classroom (Comber, 2016, p.3). Students must be regarded as whole persons in their family and cultural contexts. The ways in which we teach these young people exert a powerful influence on their linguistic, social, cognitive, and general educational development. I believe that, due to the various types of global movements, no nation is ethnically ‘monochrome’. Like Jacob’s coat, diversity too is a coat of many colours creating vibrant colour schemes of cultural tapestry not only in Australia but across the globe. Due to the many advances and changes in our world today, the students we teach are more citizens of the world than they are citizens of any particular country. Therefore, we must ensure strong and effective teaching strategies on cultural diversity that teach to ‘everybody’s children’ (Saravia-Shore, 2008).

Appendix A – Brisbane Christian College Yr. 11 Visual art Assessment and  
Citipointe Christian College Yr. 11 Visual art Assessment

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