

# Teaching the multicultural in education: balancing and fine tuning

By Richard Race

**Shared arenas.** Multiculturalism as a concept is at the forefront of political attention today, as has been highlighted in much publicised political speeches across Europe. The Australian policy document: *The People of Australia. Australia's Multicultural Policy*, published in February 2011, shows that this debate is present beyond Europe as well. What are the consequences for the way in which multicultural issues are addressed in the educational system?



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Certainly, the need to address multicultural education within classrooms and lecture theatres is ever more crucial at a time of enhanced cultural diversity. This article attempts to highlight the complexity of the politics of difference debate. Part of the backdrop of this debate is what Stephen Vertovec and Susanne Wessendorf have called "the [European] Multicultural Backlash".

I want to use comments made by political leaders in Europe to underline this backlash. Within these political contexts, I want to move on to highlight some empirical findings from my research which addressed issues concerning multiculturalism and education and flesh out some of the nuances in the way multicultural issues are perceived. I'm also going to limit the focus of this piece to England, which within a wider British context is appropriate when acknowledging the multicultural complexity and situational differences between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland systems of politics and education.

Since the early 2000s across Europe, the number of political views highlighting the condemnation of multiculturalism as a concept has increased. German Chancellor Angela Merkel's comments in November 2010, reversed her previous support for multiculturalism within Germany, a country which continues to experience increased immigration, especially but not exclusively from Eastern Europe and Turkey. Even acknowledging Merkel's desire to appeal to elements of the German electorate with her change in policy, what needs to be highlighted is this notion of the multicultural backlash.

In England, Prime Minister David Cameron provided more evidence of this trend, at a security conference speech in Munich (February 2011), when he suggested that the state must

confront, and not consort with non-violent Muslim groups that are ambiguous about British values such as equality between sexes, democracy and integration. Claiming the previous Labour government had been the victim of fear and muddled thinking by backing a state-sponsored form of multiculturalism, Cameron talked about the need for less passive tolerance and the need for more active, muscular liberalism. It is interesting to reflect on the fact that the previous government in England were no supporters of multiculturalism as an idea, supporting for example, the notions of "integration and accountability" in the English Early Child Matters education policy of 2004.

Interestingly, Nick Clegg, the Deputy Prime Minister, and Cameron's colleague within the Coalition Government in the United Kingdom gave a speech in Luton (March 2011) which opposed the notion of backlash by supporting and praising multiculturalism. Moreover for Clegg, multiculturalism is seen as a process by which people not only respect but communicate with each other. Clegg supports a multiculturalism which welcomes diversity but resists division. Furthermore for Clegg, respect and diversity are important conditions of an open, confident society.

Within the context of the politics of difference and the perceived European multiculturalism backlash, I want to highlight the findings from my book on *Multiculturalism and Education*. Firstly, my empirical data highlighted how debates on integration have impacted on education policy-making. Merkel, Cameron and Nicolas Sarkozy (concerning France banning the hijab in public places in April 2011) have used the term integration when considering policy-making. Defining integration as a conditional two way relationship between the state and individual / community, the state is in a position to control the influence of its counterpart on the policy-making process.

If multiculturalism is the celebration, not recognition of difference, then what is lost

within processes of integration? Firstly, there is a very thin line between integration and assimilation, a one-way conditional political and social relationship where the state almost totally controls what majority and minority are doing. Secondly, within the field of education, respondents who were questioned and interviewed raised the importance of awareness training and continuing professional development for practitioners in education. An inclusive, multicultural programme of lifelong learning has to continue to raise social and cultural issues that concern racism and discrimination. Learning has to involve sustained reflection on identity and collective values. Are practitioners in all professions continually trained to cope with changing cultural diversity?

The final issue which *Multiculturalism and Education* underlined is the importance of citizenship education and the possibilities and opportunities citizenship provides within its curricula to examine topical and contemporary issues relating to amongst many things, culture and society. In England, citizenship remains non-statutory within primary schools and is only compulsory delivered in state-maintained secondary schools. And with the promotion of Academy Schools in England who have the right to pick and choose their own curriculum, what will the future hold for citizenship in schools?

Interestingly, the final focus of *Multiculturalism and Education* was on citizenship rather than multicultural education. My respondents gave me many examples of multicultural innovative practice in different subjects in both classrooms and lecture theatres. There is an interesting policy comparison with the work of James Banks and colleagues in the United States who have been promoting multicultural education for the last forty years and continue to shape local, federal and national education policy. This multicultural education policy focus has not been visible in England since 1985 and there is scope for improvement in the way English schools encourage their pupils to reflect upon the principles on which our multicultural society is based, or ought to be based.

In conclusion, when reflecting on multicultural education, we need to increase our understandings of political and conceptual processes which shape education and social policy-making. Integration and its influence on policy-making remained important within England in the 2000s, but multiculturalism is still practically relevant today when examining English education in nurseries, schools, colleges and universities.



**Change of direction.** The Prime Minister, David Cameron, has criticised Labour's approach to multiculturalism under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown.  
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