Structural Deficiency or Cultural Racism: The Educational and Social Experiences of Arab-Australian Youth

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Abstract
This paper discusses the cultural, attitudinal and structural factors that impact upon the social experiences and educational achievements of Arabic-speaking background (ASB) students in three Melbourne secondary schools with high levels of cultural and linguistic diversity. The paper makes the case for and then outlines a multidimensional approach to multicultural education to better integrate ASB students and their families into the schooling environment. Key strategies developed and tested include a model of school-community partnership, online and interactive teacher support material (TSM) as well as on-going teacher professional development workshops on reflexive approaches to cultural diversity and intercultural tension.

Keywords: cultural diversity, Arab-Australian youth, multicultural education
Introduction: The Social and Policy Context of the Project

There is little doubt direct links exist between recent world events such as September 11, the Bali bombings and the Iraq war on the one hand, and increased vilification of Muslim and Arab-Australians on the other (HREOC 2004). But as early as 1996, “around Australia, Muslims … [were] convinced that … Islam has become the new global enemy” (Deen 2003: 272). It is worth exploring further how Arab and Muslim Australians have come to be seen by some to be implicated in events that, in reality, are often far beyond their control. This attitudinal shift might be understood in terms of the lack of understanding of Islam in Western cultures and the public construction of Islam as a homogeneous entity that is now associated with acts of terrorism and political violence. It might also be regarded as part of a conservative backlash against multiculturalism, or at least a conservative hardening vis-à-vis the notion of multiculturalism, where there is a fear and a deep suspicion of any Australian with multiple cultural and national allegiances, and a fear of visible communities who do not assimilate with Anglo norms.

For young Muslim Australians, this shifting social dynamic presents particular and long term risks. If, because of their Muslim identities, Muslim-Australian youth are not receiving as strong and inclusive an educational experience as they could be, there is a danger that their educational outcomes will suffer, in turn impacting their ability to access the labour market and participate fully in civic life, two of the main avenues for active citizenship. The risk is that if the current societal pattern of exclusion of Arab and Muslim Australians from full Australian citizenship is allowed to penetrate the educational system, this will engender long-term marginalisation and exclusion for future generations.

It is against this uncertain social climate that the current project was undertaken initially in partnership with a small community organisation working in a number of Melbourne public secondary schools with high levels of enrolment of students from Arabic speaking backgrounds (ASB). This early intervention work involved linking a Cultural Diversity Facilitator (CDF) with the school in question to facilitate the engagement of the Arabic community with the life of the school. In July 2004, one of these schools was closed by the state Department of Education & Training on the basis of declining enrolments and lower than average educational attainments by students (Student Outcomes Division 2003). This closure reflected a number of complex and interlinked factors including, on the one hand, insufficiently resourced structural change and, on the other hand, schools becoming embroiled in the complex politics of Australian multiculturalism in the post-September 11 environment (Mansouri & Trembath 2005). In 2005, the involvement of the second school wound down. As such, by 2006 two new schools were involved in the Project – a further school from the city’s northern suburbs and, for the first time, a culturally diverse secondary school located in Melbourne’s south eastern suburbs. This paper draws on research conducted in three of these four schools.

The research design has involved the participation of staff (principals and teachers), students and the families of students in surveys (available in English or Arabic), focus groups and semi-structured interviews. Following extensive preliminary consultations and wide literature reviews, the Project identified two intersecting socio-educational trends in the Australian context necessitating further examination. The first of these is located at the policy and funding level, with schools struggling to meet the needs of
increasingly diverse student populations while facing the constraints of diminishing resources. In Victoria, and to some extent in all Australian states, the advent of ‘retentionphilic’ (Henry & Grundy 2004) policies typically flow from arguments around the need to equip Australia’s workforce with higher levels of knowledge and skills thereby responding to the challenge of the globalised context. In regard to secondary schools, there is increasing emphasis laid on the importance of young people completing the final years of secondary school, or its equivalent, as preparation for the continuing study that will be necessary to enter and remain effective in a labour market influenced by the forces of globalisation. In Victoria we have seen this policy focus actioned through the development of targets to increase school retention, an increase in the school leaving age to 16, and the development of an additional senior school qualification, the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL). As a result of these policies, school retention has increased, with the consequence that we now have increased diversity in the senior years of school. Yet, for a range of reasons, schools have been slow to respond to the learning needs of this much more diverse population (Henry & Grundy 2004).

The other trend is at the social level and relates to the increasing social marginality that Arab and Muslim communities in Australia are facing in the current political environment. This social marginality is partly reflected in more pronounced process of exclusion and racialized discourses towards Arab-Australians in the wake of September 11 and the so-called War on Terror. There is now a significant body of work that explores the impact of this environment upon Arab-Australian communities in general and young Arab-Australians’ experience of social and cultural marginalisation in particular (HREOC 2004, Poynting & Ang 2004, Poynting et al. 2004, White 2004).

Theorising and implementing Multicultural Education

Multicultural education has been defined as “an approach to teaching and learning that is based upon democratic values and beliefs and that affirms cultural pluralism within culturally diverse societies in an interdependent world” (Bennett 2003: 14). While initially multicultural education focused upon ethnic groups, the ability to successfully live and interact in a globalised, interdependent world is increasingly being seen as a fundamental component of the education of all students. According to Bennett (2003), multicultural education is philosophically underpinned by four core values. In her words these are, firstly, acceptance and appreciation of cultural diversity; secondly, respect for human dignity and universal human rights; thirdly, responsibility to the world community and finally, reverence for the earth.

In Australia, official support for multicultural education has centred on the aims of encouraging civic duty, cultural respect, equity and productive diversity for all Australian students. However, such official support for multicultural education “mask(s) an uneasy ambivalence” towards multiculturalism and multicultural education by elites within the Anglo-Celtic ‘core’ of Australia (Hickling-Hudson 2002: 3). As Troyna (1993) notes, in an effort to maintain an ideal of social order and cohesion, certain fundamental oppressions and systemic disadvantages may go unchallenged by a superficial form of multiculturalism, and a form of multicultural education that results from this ideology.

This gap in both traditional multicultural education theory and the Australian policy framework is explicitly identified and addressed by a number of newer approaches, in
particular those applying Critical Race Theory (CRT). As applied to educational theory, CRT endeavours to move beyond the recognition of cultural difference on a purely ‘ethnic’ level, for example, in the pursuit of occasional activities such as Harmony Day, to address structural disadvantage and a discourse of marginalisation. Rather than beginning with a dominant discourse, or the idea of the average student, CRT focuses on the marginalised students and captures their individual stories as the basis of a counter discourse aimed at challenging the dominant stereotypes of culturally different groups. By drawing on individual stories, it seeks to raise awareness of the lived experience of difference with a view to building mutual understanding across cultural groups and to deepen, and equalise, students’ educational experience. At the same time, CRT insists that while alternative stories or ‘counter-narratives’ are necessary for any meaningful positive change to happen, for that change to be deep and lasting, it is necessary to challenge existing socio-economic structures in a way that provides equal opportunities for all irrespective of race, gender or religion.

How does Victorian education policy fare in this context? The state’s policy argues that the school system is a major social change agent with an important role to play in the development of attitudes, values and critical thinking and in confronting barriers to social participation (Department of Education & Training 1997). Yet while being confronted with increasingly culturally diverse populations (Mansouri 2004) this role is played out in a broader educational context that has been found to replicate rather than challenge patterns of social inequality (Teese & Polesel 2003). The Victorian government has responded to these challenges through a range of policy initiatives building beyond the Multicultural Policy for Victorian Schools (1997) and the Guidelines for Managing Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in Schools (2001) to include the Blueprint for Government Schools (2003), the Victorian Curriculum Reform Project (2004) and the introduction of Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) in 2005. All of these policies suggest implications and opportunities for Victorian schools and their communities.

The Multicultural Policy for Victorian Schools (1997) outlines a number of criteria and aims for schools which need to develop an in-depth knowledge and awareness of the concept of culture; an understanding of the multicultural nature of Australia’s past and present history, and of the interdependence of cultures in the development of the nation. Schools must also have skills and understandings to interact comfortably and competently in intercultural settings and an awareness of the reality of the global village and national interdependence in areas of trade, finance, labour, politics and communications, and that the development of international understanding and cooperation is essential.

The Guidelines for Managing Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in Schools (2001) outlined its commitment to assisting all students and staff to become informed, productive, adaptable, motivated and creative citizens, who take full advantage of their economic, social and individual opportunities. It also requires schools to build an accepting environment where all staff and students are treated with dignity and respect and where diversity is valued thereby creating a learning environment where stereotypes are questioned and bias, bigotry, ethnocentrism, prejudice or racism are wholeheartedly rejected. This policy promotes diversity as an educational advantage, insofar as:
Diversity brings significant educational benefits to all students, teachers and administrators and the wider community. ... Schools can be, and generally are, model communities of mutual respect, harmony and tolerance. (Department of Education, Employment & Training 2001: 2)

The *Blueprint for Government Schools* (2003) made recommendations for the identification and development of essential learnings. The Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority’s (VCAA) *Victorian Curriculum Reform Project* (2004) responded to this recommendation. The VCAA’s new curriculum standards—the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS), have augmented the framework for Victorian government schools’ curriculum. In addition, on 1 January 2005, the Multicultural Victoria Act (2004) came into effect enshrining principles of access, participation and contribution, for all Victorian citizens, to services made available by the Victorian Government.

The Multicultural Victoria Act has a number of important implications for school councils, principals, staff and students. School councils are committed to ensuring that the contents of any existing policy document including the Accountability and Improvement Framework, and particularly the school profile, codes of practice and the Student Code of Conduct reflect the principles of multiculturalism. They must also promote and preserve diversity and cultural heritage among members of the school community, ensuring all members of the school community are equally entitled to access opportunities and participate in and contribute to the social, cultural, economic and political life of Victoria. School councils are charged with encouraging and facilitating the participation by all parents in school community activities and decision making, taking into account the principles of multiculturalism.

The Act also has implications for school staff who are committed to promoting and affirming diversity in all aspects of their work practices and interactions with students, parents, other staff. School staff are charged with ensuring curriculum programs and classroom materials incorporate multicultural perspectives and reflect a range of cultural experiences as well as using teaching and assessment strategies that cater for a range of learning styles. They also have a role in monitoring the school environment in terms of promoting and preserving diversity and cultural heritage and assisting the school’s efforts to incorporate the principles of multiculturalism.

Finally, students also have responsibilities under the Act and are expected to abide by the Student Code of Conduct, in particular the principles concerned with the valuing student individuality, including that of race, gender, or cultural diversity. Students are charged with participating in cultural awareness, anti racism and other curriculum-linked strategies aimed at increasing respect for diversity. Importantly, the *Multicultural Policy for Victorian Schools* (1997) reflects the appreciation inherent in the Multicultural Victoria Act that curriculum content, whilst important, is only one aspect of multicultural education.

**Data Collection**

Given that the study has adopted a multidimensional approach to investigating the needs of ASB students, it was important to elicit data from a range of sources. In addition to
academic research and textual analysis, the primary data was based on interviews and questionnaires conducted with teachers, students and Arabic-speaking parents at the participating schools in research sessions. Here, we will engage briefly with the data sourced from ASB students.

The data collection for this Project started in 2003 when pre-testing was undertaken in order to determine the attitudes of students, teachers and parents towards racism, educational attainments and inter-ethnic perceptions. This first round of data collection was critical for assessing the experience of students, teachers and parents under the current system and deriving initial input for the key intervention strategies, in particular the school-parents partnership initiative and the teacher support materials resource. The data presented here is exclusively drawn from this early phase. However, and in order to monitor the effectiveness of the strategies developed in this project, data has also been collected during the intervention phase and also following the completion of the implementation phase. The following table outlines the timeline and scope of data collection with Arab-Australian students as well as students from non-Arab backgrounds:

### Students Surveyed and Interviewed – 2003 to 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>ASB Students</th>
<th>Non-ASB Students</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Students were randomly selected and approached to participate in the research, with the necessary condition of consent from their parents. Focus groups were run with students divided into ASB groups and students from other mixed backgrounds. This method of division was chosen so that comparisons could be made between ASB students and non-ASB students. For instance, in 2006 we surveyed 108 students (60 ASB and 48 non-ASB), 12 students engaged in one-on-one interviews (7 ASB and 5 non-ASB) and 44 students participated in focus group discussions (23 ASB and 21 non-ASB). In approaching the data elicited from students the study measured the results of the questionnaires quantitatively to ascertain whether there are any statistical differences in answers between ASB students and non-ASB students. In the questionnaires, students were asked a range of structured questions relating to the themes of happiness, belonging and
relationships at school, perceptions of the school’s educational standards and students’ educational ambitions, perceptions of intercultural relations at school, family support for education, and identity and their place in local and national communities. Focus groups discussions, interviews and written answers have been analysed qualitatively.

**Study’s Findings**

This section of the data analysis focuses on students’ narratives collected through the 2003-04 period of the data collection schedule. These narratives highlight the interconnection between socio-political events and the socio-educational climate within schools. In this sense, they indicate the need for a holistic approach that goes beyond the educational experience, conceived in isolation.

In regard to student perceptions of the school’s educational standards and students’ educational ambitions, ASB boys often stated that they found the school environment inert and unengaging, arguing that this dragged them back academically. The non-ASB students were generally more positive about teachers, though still reported negative feelings about the learning environment more generally. They felt that the general learning environment was unengaging, subject selection too limited, school reputation poor, and studies unchallenging. ASB students were very concerned about the ‘perceived’ increase in racism against Arabic and Muslim communities in Australia, associated with global and local events. Throughout the focus group discussions, students argued that political events, most notably September 11, had changed the way Arab-Australians are perceived and treated by the community. The students discussed the conflation of Arab and Muslim communities into a singular homogeneous category, constructed as synonymous with threat and terrorism, and often identified through visual markers of difference:

> Like all Arabs are terrorists. Especially girls with scarves.

The boys felt that the media vilified and misrepresented their culture, and that they were targeted by police on account of their cultural background. The girls discussed particular instances of racism, especially relating to wearing the hijab. Many of the female students were particularly concerned about negative attitudes towards girls and women who could be immediately identified with Islam:

> Sometimes because we’ve got the scarf on it directs straight to us, ‘oh they’re Muslim’. Like if you look at her (indicates a peer not wearing a scarf), you’re gonna think straight away, ‘oh she’s not Muslim, not her’. They’re not gonna know unless she actually said it ...

The perceived ‘criminalisation’ of Arab and Muslim identity in Australia was also a common theme in students’ discussions. Some students were highly attuned to the racialisation of crime in the Australian media. In the following discussion, a group of boys discern a stark contrast between media treatment of crimes committed by Arab-Australians as opposed to Anglo-Australians:

> Especially the media, ’cause the media, they show us as bad people through the news.

> And they always refer, ‘they are Lebbo’.
Yeah, ‘they are Lebbo’ and they mention our religion.

‘Oh, they’re Muslims.’ See, they don’t go, ‘oh, a Christian man raped this girl’, it’s all ‘a Muslim man raped this girl’.

Yeah, and every time a Lebanese or someone Muslim does something they get jailed, and if some Aussie would go kidnap a baby, they’d get ...

It would just say ‘A man kidnapped a baby’. If it was a Muslim, ‘an Arab kidnapped this kid’, they wouldn’t say a man.

Overall, students moved fluidly from discussing abstract processes of racialisation to relating personal narratives of racism. This pattern of conversation indicates a complexity in how the students made sense of their social experiences. They appeared able to see and make connections between their personal experiences of racism on the one hand, and structural exclusions and institutional exercises of power on the other. They seemed aware of and disturbed by the tendency to use political events to construct stereotypical representations of Arabs and Muslims in Australia as a homogeneous, racialised, threatening ‘Other’, an image that the media perpetuated powerfully in its coverage of national and global political crises. While the Arab-Australian students involved in the study were predominantly of Lebanese descent, students of Egyptian, Syrian, Iraqi and other national backgrounds also participated. Yet despite the diversity of national backgrounds, the students did not commonly identify themselves collectively as being ‘of Arabic-speaking background’, ‘Arab-Australians’ or ‘Arabs’. Even the term ‘Lebanese-Australian’ was used only in rare instances. The participating students almost exclusively used the term ‘Lebbo’ to describe themselves, and being Muslim was seen as a source of unity and a marker of cultural identity and belonging to a social group. In fact, in the context of discussing their experiences of racism, the students tended to downplay their ‘Australianness’ and question whether they are ever likely to be accepted as Australians. The following excerpt from an exchange between two boys highlights the uncertainty many students expressed about claiming a hybrid Lebanese-Australian identity:

Student A: I don’t like being, you know, Lebbo and English, ’cause like, I’m both, right, and I still get teased, see no one teases me, “oh you’re Aussie, you’re half this that”, they always come to me “oh you’re Lebbo you’re Lebbo”, like that, especially Aussies, like they don’t know that I’m half, so they always go “you’re Lebbo”.

Student B: But you’re not necessarily half Aussie.

Student A: I was born here.

Student B: Alright, alright, I know what you mean.

This brief exchange highlights the intricate and complex process of negotiating inter-cultural identities. It is not clear whether Student A defines his hybrid Lebanese-Australian identity by ethnicity, or national citizenship status. He appears to place an emphasis on the latter by arguing his ‘half Lebbo, half Aussie’ identity arises from him being born in Australia. Student B appears to challenge Student A’s ambivalent sense of hybrid identity by suggesting that Australian citizenship and birthplace may not equate with being ‘Aussie’. As Student A suggests, racial identifiers are often used to differentiate
and exclude ethnic minority groups from a dominant, mono-culturally defined Australian identity.

Mirroring this sense of ambivalence about ‘being Australian’, students also often appeared uncertain about whether they regarded Australia—even partly—as home. Some students argued that Lebanon was their sole, true home—despite the fact that they may never have lived in Lebanon. When asked why this was the case, they related their apparent rejection of the Australian national space to the exclusion and racism they experienced within it. In contrast with this sense of antipathy towards Australia, many of the students held strong connections to their local community. The students regarded the culturally diverse nature of their local area positively because it provided them with a sense of belonging, security and cultural identity.

Students generally felt very positive about their social interactions with other students. However, the research findings suggest a significant level of disengagement with the schools as learning institutions. They frequently attributed their own disengagement from school and the processes of learning to: (a) perceptions of teacher disinterest in them as individuals, and as young Arab- and Muslim-Australians; (b) perceptions of teacher racism; and (c) low teacher expectations of their schooling achievements. Data collected from teachers goes some way to endorse these perceptions. Only 8% of teachers perceived curriculum constraints as a key challenge in working in a culturally diverse setting, 33% responded that student indifference was the key challenge. A large proportion of teachers (59%) thought both parents and the community represented the key challenge in such contexts. In part, the challenge of working with these parents is a consequence of many parents of ASB students (and non-English speaking parents in general) being either illiterate and/or unfamiliar with the educational system in Australia. However, the data reinforces Banks’ (1997: 69) argument that even if the taught curriculum is reformed to reflect multicultural education dimensions, unless the ‘deep structure’ and the hidden curriculum of the school is also transformed, traditional unjust social structures will be perpetuated and ensure continuance of barriers to equitable learning for all students. Based on existing literature on multicultural education as well as the empirical findings of this project, a multidimensional model toward cultural diversity in schools has been developed and is now being tested in the participating schools. The following section describes the four components of this model and the key enabling strategies and resources required for its successful implementation.

**A Multicultural education model for the current context**

Effectively to promote understanding and acceptance of differences across the entire community, school initiatives need to be integrative (infused through all elements of the educational enterprise), egalitarian (assuring equitable status for all parties), substantive (ongoing, significant and purposeful), inclusive (involving all stakeholders) and culturally responsive (sensitive to the cultural backgrounds of all member groups) in their orientation (Johnson 2003:19).

Taking the legislative and policy framework, the experiences of students, teachers and parents and multicultural education theory as its starting points, the present study has developed a multidimensional model of multicultural education. This model draws
on the critical educationalist’s view that education is transformative as well as on various contemporary streams of current multicultural education theory that emphasise education as involving many factors, sites and dimensions.

School is not simply a learning institution; it is a ‘complex social system’ (Banks 1997: 69). Conceptualising the school in such a way ensures that all dimensions of schooling, not only classroom teaching practices and curricula, are reformed and changed in a systematic way. Central to this approach is the concept of ‘cultural responsiveness’. Cultural responsiveness implies that in order to effectively respond to the needs of their increasingly diverse student populations, schools have to become more flexible in their pedagogical, curricular and structural approaches to education. It attempts to bridge the gap between multicultural educational policies and theories on the one hand, and pluralistic educational practice on the other, with particular reference to the specific needs of the school community in question. Cultural responsiveness is underpinned by the principle ‘that diverse ways of understanding and interpreting the world are an asset and a resource, not a liability, and that it is in the best interest of all learners to build on the strengths and experiences that children collectively bring to the classroom’ (Johnson, 2003: 24).

Current theorising around multicultural education tends to take this type of holistic approach, highlighting the importance of individual staff practices, school-based curricula practices, pedagogy and policies, school-community relations, and broader structural factors such as educational policies and curriculum as well as the way these distinct factors are related. Linking this multidimensional approach to the concept of cultural responsiveness, Johnson suggests that there are five components to a successful whole-school approach to building a culturally responsive school ethos: school management, teachers, curriculum and instruction, parents and community, and student development and support services.

Following from this, this study has developed and adopted a multidimensional model of multicultural education in the context of Victorian schools. The multidimensional aspect of the model in this study assumes that school education is experienced and influenced by a combination of factors. In particular, these relate to pedagogic choices, opportunities for social engagement, the involvement of families in their children’s education, school resources, and individual students’ prior educational experiences and understanding of culture, identity and social background. The transformative dimension of the model recognises that students are not only disadvantaged by learning disabilities, but also by socially-constructed barriers to learning. In this sense, successful multicultural education requires change not only in students, but also more importantly in the various dimensions of the educational system and the schools.
The multidimensional approach to cultural diversity in education

Looking now at the actual structure of the proposed model, it operates along four dimensions:

- Parents: Community-Schools Partnership Project
- Policy: Model of Best Practice
- Practice: On-line Teacher Support Materials (TSM)
- Pedagogy: Professional Development for Teachers
The project’s work with parents involves a Cultural Diversity Facilitator (CDF), who, in this case is a staff member from a local Arabic social services provider. The CDF spends an agreed number of days per week in Project schools to foster parent and community involvement. The CDF, together with Deakin University staff, has run groups with participating schools to instigate parent networks and to ascertain the key areas of concern within each school. Out of this work, a series of eight Parent Modules have been developed specifically targeted at the issues that have become evident and to encourage parental involvement. Some of the themes explored in these modules include familiarity with the Australian educational system; understanding the role of extra-curricular activities; reading and understanding school reports, and engaging productively with the school’s key structures. This practical approach to community involvement capitalises on the opportunity in the Victorian curriculum framework, which recognises that students in Years 9 and 10 need to engage with the community in order to make their educational experience relevant to their futures.

The parents’ modules were designed to ensure parents are more involved in school life, and for teachers and students to be more understanding and respectful of diverse cultures. Due to economic and staffing constraints, many schools do not adjust quickly enough to the changing demographics of their student population. The CDF’s role reflects this need to managing cultural diversity in schools that goes beyond the confines of the school environment, particularly when dealing with migrant students whose parents are in most cases of low socio-economic background. Therefore, the CDF’s activities are crucial when dealing with such parents who are often pressured by limited resources, extensive family responsibilities and social isolation, due to language as well as economic barriers. Many parents in this project have limited, and sometimes no educational experience, and in many cases have expectations based upon an entirely different educational structure and curriculum. In addition to working with Arab and Muslim parents, the CDF also works with teachers whose experience in teaching students from culturally diverse backgrounds may be limited and whose own education and training do not often reflect the rapidly changing cultural configurations of their schools. As a result, teachers struggle in developing meaningful relationships with parents without any supportive guidance or infrastructure. To this end, the CDF contributes to the expansion of extra-curricular activities that include: the development of student discussion groups, within and across ethnic groups; workshops and forums involving community members; encouragement of student leadership and initiative; and creative outlets for students to develop and express a sense of identity.

The Policy focus involves the development of a Model of Best Practice that has a focus on whole school environment and policy change. In order for this to happen, schools need to appropriately exhibit the following attributes: philosophy and structures; leadership and attitudes; resources and facilities; partnerships and relationships. The proposed model attempts to move away from approaches to education that position students as ‘passive recipients’ of information delivered by neutrally-positioned teachers. The Model of Best Practice reflects a belief that the recognition and understanding of cultural difference promotes positive educational outcomes for all learners. It is also committed to challenging the barriers that inhibit migrant and minority group access to social goods in the wider society. It is therefore aimed at developing students’ sense of cultural identity, while facilitating the acquisition of skills and knowledge necessary to
effectively access the mainstream culture. The proposed model promotes access to these two arenas by recognising and breaking down the ‘in-school’ expressions of exclusionary practices often associated with wider social responses to cultural difference.

Figure 2: Teacher Support Materials

![Teacher Support Materials](image-url)
If the entire school is engaged in a process of collaborative transformation, then students are likely to find such changes meaningful, rich and consistent. In this process, the model adopted in this study recognizes the skills and capacities students bring to a transformative educational dialogue. Importantly, the model works from the basis that transformative multicultural education is of benefit to all involved in the educational process, not just Arab and other minority students. While the emphasis lies in promoting improved learning outcomes for students who experience educational disadvantage, research clearly indicates that the benefits of inclusive multicultural education extend beyond these students to the broader school community.

The Practice dimension has been pursued through the development of a fully interactive website for teacher use – the Teacher Support Materials (TSM). Three groups of voices drawn from the research data collected between 2003 and 2006 are included on this website: students, parents and teachers of students from a variety of national, ethnic and religious groups including Iraqi Muslim, Christian of Assyrian ethnicity, Chaldean descent and Australian-born Lebanese. The TSM provides themed avenues for individual professional development as well as providing wide-ranging resources for use in the classroom. Ultimately the website will be complemented by a print TSM Guide.

Finally, the Pedagogy dimension concerns professional development of school staff. Professional development has occurred at a number of levels: through reflective work in the research process; through the development, testing and use of the TSM and, finally, by a process of formal professional development where schools are brought together to work collaboratively in enhancing their intercultural skills. This opportunity integrates learning about the policy context, provision of theory, exploration of the research findings, self-reflective work and the development of intercultural skills for the classroom using the TSM as one resource.

This four-pronged approach to the social and educational experiences of Arab-Australian youth reflects the whole-school perspective pursued in this study where pedagogic structures and community/parents strategies are focused on producing better attainment outcomes for individual students as well as culturally responsive school ethos for all.

Conclusion

In helping to understand Arab-Australian students’ social experiences and the resultant impact on educational attainment, previous sociological studies of young Arab-Australians illustrate that even before the events of September 11, socio-political dynamics were greatly affecting the identity formation of many young Arab-Australians. This paper explored whether the changing local, national and global socio-political dynamics post September 11 are linked to Arab-Australian students’ low educational attainments and negative social experiences.

The study’s findings suggest that change in socio-political dynamics around Islamic identity in Australia have not only affected young Arab-Australians’ sense of identity, but also their educational experiences. It is not suggested here that there is a direct causal link between the two or that the effect of racism and exclusion is the sole factor influencing Arab-Australian students’ educational experiences. Nevertheless, racism and social exclusion were factors of concern readily and repeatedly identified by students.
and parents. While parents indicated that overt teacher racism is a rare phenomenon, students’ reactions to particular instances of unhappy interactions with teachers cannot be dismissed as over-sensitivity. At the very least, this study’s findings suggest that the effects of racism on young Arab-Australians, particularly since the events of September 11, have been underestimated in educational research and practice. They further suggest that responses must involve a multidimensional approach such as that suggested here.

References


