We hear a lot about failing (public) schools in media, political and policy discourses. What is rarely recognised is that schools, teachers and leaders now confront greater complexity than ever before — student personalised learning, multi-literacies and multi-modal ways of teaching and learning, the internationalisation and nationalisation of curriculum, the integration of learning technologies, developing metacognitive competencies for knowledge-based globalised economies, and inter-cultural awareness. Schools in democratic societies are also expected in this period of intensified movement of people as students, refugees, workers, teachers and travellers to produce social cohesion and global citizens as we live in more culturally diverse communities.

We also know that there are ongoing if not institutionalised patterns of exclusion with evidence of a widening not lessening of disparity in educational outcomes between rich and poor schools, students, families and communities in most Western societies (Lamb et al, 2004).
If schools are to develop as inclusive communities, then equality and diversity need to be acknowledged as twin principles. Models of research and leadership based on the recognition of diversity which fail to acknowledge structural inequalities are likely to explain inequitable outcomes by locating the problem in minority communities or by explaining them in terms of cultural misunderstandings.

(Osler, 2006, p136)

Due to recent school funding policies in Australia and elsewhere, schooling is increasingly becoming the means by which individual and familial social advantage is maintained and enhanced as those who have the economic capacity and cultural resources mobilise a rights-based discourse of educational choice. Indeed, it is the capacity of schools to select their students and thereby exclude those that “do not fit” either academically or socially that best explains (selection often being a proxy for family background) the differentials between academic outcomes between schools (Lamb et al, 2004). Furthermore, evidence in Australia, the US, UK, NZ and Canada points to a geographical concentration of inadequate community infrastructure, poor health and wellbeing and unemployment arising from de-industrialisation and policies of choice that often, but not necessarily, coincide with educational underachievement (Lamb et al, 2004, Vinson 2002, 2007).

Exclusion from social resources occurs because of the unequal distribution of collective assets such as transport, health facilities or assistance for students with disabilities; as a consequence of living in damaging environments where there is industrial pollution or family violence; and cultural marginalisation as individuals or groups experience racism or sexism. School policies (fees, disciplinary, uniform, curriculum etc) that exclude tend to result in communities of sameness because people tend to choose to be with people like themselves. But by default, the choices of a few can reduce the choices of many as there is a shift in resources. Education markets thus, ironically, devalue diversity and difference and value sameness and uniformity in terms of what counts as a “good” school or student.

Current policy solutions to address student disengagement can unintentionally produce exclusion because of their normalising tendencies due to their focus on finer calibrations of measurement of outcomes, rankings, national curriculum, standardised assessment, narrow measures of literacy and numeracy, pedagogical orthodoxies and a focus on “at risk” students. Such policies do not address the “real” issues of why students feel or are “excluded” from schooling. Dropping out of school is a process that occurs over time. Students lose connectedness with education not due to lack of ability or educational underachievement, but because of poor social relationships with their peers and teachers or a sense of exclusion. Getting any job is better than being at school. Many gain a sense of identity and agency outside school with peers or in work. The cultural baggage students bring to school is often ignored in curriculum and pedagogy.

In a culturally diverse society, we would expect schools to recognise diversity as a positive aspect of education and that they would seek to create communities of practice that recognise and respect difference. Social inclusion in and through schooling requires recognition by governments that some schools need additional support because of the diverse needs of their students. Diversity and difference are to be valued and not to be seen as a disadvantage. “Inclusion is people wanting to participate as valued, appreciated equals in the social, economic, politics and cultural life of the community (in valued social situations) and to be involved in mutually trusting, appreciative and respectful interpersonal relationship at the family, peer and community levels” (Babacan et al., 2007, p14). Inclusion has many educational dimensions. There is increasing evidence, for example, of strong links between student health, a sense of wellbeing (such as freedom from racism or sexism) and educational achievement (Tett, 2003). A “pupil’s educational achievement cannot easily be separated from their personal, social, emotional and physical development and well being” (Campbell & Whitty, 2002, p99).

Schools need to be places where students (and teachers) feel they belong, where they get a sense of achievement in some aspect of their lives, where they are recognised and feel connected. Schools often provide a “restorative environment”, one where students can feel safe to take risks and process events that challenge their experience with security, privacy and control, authentic pedagogies that provide scope for agency and a sense of capacity to change one’s self and one’s future. But a focus on the social should not be to the detriment of the academic. An inclusive school is one that combines individualised learning plans with high academic expectations as well as focusing on basic skills/essential learning within a framework of developing generic meta-cognitive and social capacities. When treating student knowledge as a cultural resource, there is a focus on authentic pedagogies and assessment, through problem-solving tasks that dissolve academic/vocational binaries (Lingard et al, 2003).

Inclusive schools provide opportunities for students to be co-producers of knowledge. In one secondary school, while the Lebanese students felt marginalised after 9/11 from the wider community, they felt particularly marginalised from the school edge. In one secondary school, while the Lebanese students felt marginalised after 9/11 from the wider community, they felt particularly marginalised from the school system as they did not have the same resources. They also desired what other schools had — a depth and breadth of curriculum that facilitated choice, multi-modalities of learning, performances of success as well as extracurricular activities around drama, outdoor education and sport, activities requiring organisational and temporal flexibility by the school leaders. But foremost was their desire for teachers who listened to, and cared for, them.

In a study of “resilient” students and schools we found that students in schools and/or families facing challenging circumstances — poverty, poor health and wellbeing, lack of resources — but who did well educationally had developed strategies of resilience. These resilient students mobilised social, school and familial networks; used available resources (school and teacher knowledge etc); and were able to identify and make choices. Relationships based on a sense of reciprocity and mutual engagement with other students were central. Schools also often acted as links in
social networks into employment and further education or training where the social networks of families or communities had fragmented. Such schools also had clear policies agreed upon by all staff that worked against sexism and racism. Inclusivity is premised upon both recognition of respect for difference and what different perspectives, values and experiences bring to education through policies and everyday practices. An inclusive school is one that provides multiple programs to meet both the academic and personal needs of all students, that focuses on student identity and self efficacy, develops a strong pastoral care system and is a restorative place of caring and sharing (Alton-Lee, 2003).

Inclusive schools also tend to be more democratic in their decision making. Inclusion has a symbolic dimension. Schools need to offer symbolic and practical reconciliation in the form of deliberative processes that integrate community and families and not just superficial activities around cultural displays, sport and the arts. This requires deliberative processes that seek to involve all stakeholders in decision making beyond the token representative. Community representatives do not feel included if their opinions are marginalised or ignored in discussions or do not inform decisions. Inclusive schools therefore develop strategies to welcome families, such as parent visits to learn about the school philosophy and setting up discussion circles. Respect requires schools to listen to different community stakeholders, and to create processes and conditions of trust that make parents and students feel not only that they can speak out but also influence decisions.

Inclusive schools also need to be inclusive for teachers. Teachers’ sense of belonging and professional efficacy are equally important in terms of improving student learning. That is, the same principles of respect, professional autonomy and efficacy, recognition of achievement, and valuing of different perspectives are key principles of collegial cultures. Inclusive schools also require teachers to work with difference as a cultural resource to be mobilised in the curriculum and pedagogies and to develop a wide pedagogical repertoire to address individual difference. In order to develop programs that link to community, teachers also have to learn to engage with different paradigms and ways of thinking as they make links with external partners and agencies such as universities, TAFE, industry and community organisations.

In a community of difference there are often moments of discomfort because of different ways of doing and seeing (Trifonas, 2003). Teachers need to be reflective of how they are positioned within communities of difference in terms of their gendered, racialised and cultural identities. Likewise school leaders have to become culturally astute, capable of cross-cultural border crossings and develop a capacity to build communities of difference based on respect, responsibility, embracing diverse perspectives, valuing multiple languages, providing authentic pedagogy and assessment that is relevant (Shields, 2002). While there is considerable agreement about what constitutes inclusion in pedagogy and for students, there is less attention paid to inclusive leadership. Leaders in schools still tend to be white and male … and this offers a message to community, students and minority group teachers about inclusion. Teachers and leaders need to recognise their own positionality, often that...