

# Race, Identity and Education Achievements Among Arab-Australian Students

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## Abstract

*This paper discusses the challenge of managing cultural diversity in secondary schools, focusing on key structural, ideological, cultural, attitudinal and identity factors affecting the educational experiences and outcomes of Australian students from Arabic-speaking background (ASB). Recent research indicates that there are complex processes at play that hinder the ability of non English-speaking background (NESB) students to access constructive and meaningful education, and that such processes need further systematic investigation. It has also been argued that Australian schools are failing the test of social equity and that the dominant approach to curriculum and pedagogy does not meet the needs of the growing numbers of students from divergent cultural and socio-economic backgrounds.*

*This paper focuses on identifying the social, cultural and attitudinal factors that affect the educational achievements of ASB students within a broad multidimensional approach to multicultural education. By linking thorough empirical research and innovative theory with practical, tested plans of action, this study proposes an in-principled approach to multicultural education that is extendable to a variety of schooling contexts while retaining its core focus on effecting positive learning outcomes. The key objectives of the larger study upon which this paper is based are to (a) address the disadvantages and barriers faced by NESB young people, particularly ASB young people, in achieving positive educational outcomes; (2) increase their chances for better life opportunities and self fulfilment; and (3) develop a good practice model for diversity management in Victorian schools. This latter objective will complement Victorian Government policies on cultural diversity and multicultural education.*

**Keywords:** Multicultural education, Race and identity, Arab-Australian youth, Cross-cultural pedagogies

## Introduction

The study discussed in this paper seeks to locate and address the various factors—structural, ideological, cultural, attitudinal and identity—that facilitate or hinder the educational access of students from Arabic-speaking backgrounds (ASB). The study was designed and commenced following the expressions of concern by two school communities in Melbourne, Victoria—Blackwood College and Clayfield Girls Secondary College. For the purpose of maintaining anonymity, this paper uses pseudonyms rather than the schools' real names. The school communities involved in this research had previously expressed concerns about their capacities to successfully meet the needs of their diverse student populations. Of particular interest to them was the promotion of more positive educational outcomes for their ASB students who comprise a significant percentage of the student populations. Arabic is now the fourth most common language other than English spoken in Victoria and these schools are located in the heart of large Arabic-speaking communities.

This paper uses the experiences of Arab-Australian students as an illustrative case study to suggest ways to achieve more successful multicultural educational outcomes in secondary schools. It will be argued that successful culturally diverse schooling relies on

a combination of factors or dimensions that can be adapted to meet the needs of various minority groups. The multidimensional model of multicultural education proposed in this study complements Australian state and federal policy frameworks on cultural diversity and multicultural education. The paper will attempt to show, through the proposed model, how such policy frameworks may be extended, deepened and rendered more meaningful to schools in their practices of multicultural education.

## Social Context of the Study

In response to the immediate concerns of the participating school communities and the educational experiences of their Arab-Australian students, this study has identified two intersecting social trends in Australia necessitating further academic examination.

The first trend is that many Australian schools are struggling to meet the needs of increasingly diverse student populations and are inhibited by a lack of innovative pedagogy and curriculum, as well as by diminishing financial and teaching resources. Teese and Polesel (2003:12) argue that the secondary education system in Australia is "far from being ... democratic". Patterns of social inequality tend to be replicated rather than challenged in Australian schooling systems. Students who are from



disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, whose parents do not have high educational levels, who have a language background other than English, who are Indigenous, or who attend disadvantaged schools tend to achieve poorer educational outcomes than other Australian students (Rothman and McMillan 2003:30; ABS 2002:1-3). Given this trend, this study also seeks to understand the structural and school-level factors, such as policies and pedagogical ideologies that may impact upon the educational outcomes of NESB students.

The second social trend identified by this study is the increasing social marginality and hostility that Arab and Muslim communities in Australia are facing in the current socio-political environment. This social marginality can be measured to some extent by the increase in exclusionary discourse against Arab- and Muslim-Australians in the media to the point where they were reported to be the most vilified ethnic group in Australia in 2003 (Dunn, 2003:2-4; HREOC, 2004). Racism and xenophobic attitudes towards them grew markedly following global crises, such as September 11, the Bali bombings, the Iraq War and the Madrid's terrorist attack. Young Arab- and Muslim Australians in particular have been the subject of age-specific forms of exclusionary discourse. There have been numerous instances where the Australian mass media and political commentators have cast Arab- and Muslim-Australian boys as violent, misogynist, criminal gang members who live outside mainstream Australian society as was the case with the media hysteria about the so-called Lebanese youth gangs in Sydney (Collins *et al.*, 2000). Similarly, young Muslim-Australian women wearing the *hijab* are often stereotyped as repressed, and have been the subjects of widespread verbal and physical abuse as evidence in a recent Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission inquiry into prejudice against Arab and Muslim Australians (HREOC, 2004).

These social manifestations of exclusionary and to some extent discriminatory discourses are further confirmed in recent socio-demographic data which reveals that ASB communities in Australia tend to be characterised by high levels of unemployment, low levels of income and educational attainment, all compounding their social marginality (see for example ABS, 2001; VOMA, 2003).

The destructive social and cultural impact on young Arab and Muslim-Australians resulting from racism and exclusionary experiences should not be underestimated. The potential for the creation of an 'oppositional' rather than a positive form of engagement with the mainstream community is real (Turner, 2003:416). This type of oppositional behaviour can be best illustrated in the case of Lebanese youths in Western Sydney where "their 'Lebaneseness' became a defence mechanism or 'resistance identity' asserting a collective strength

which could be mobilised against the experience of racism and exclusion from the mainstream. But the contradiction is that the resulting public discourse about Lebanese crime reproduces the conditions of that exclusion: negative cultural stereotypes are rebroadcast and reaffirmed in the public mind" (Collins *et al.*, 1999: 232).

Many of the ASB students participating in this study are second-generation Australians facing the added challenges of intergenerational cultural change and hybrid identities. The impact of their inter-cultural identities on their schooling experiences will be explored in terms of attitudinal factors that relate specifically to:

- the way ASB students, as members of a minority group, view their educational experiences;
- the extent to which their family attitudes and values impact upon their school achievements; and
- whether schools are equipped (in terms of ideologies and structures) to address their educational and social needs.

### **Current Perspectives in Multicultural Education**

Few academic studies, particularly Australian studies, set out to explicitly identify the links that may exist between issues of belonging, identity, and perceptions of culture on the one hand, and educational outcomes on the other. This paper argues that subjective experiences of students' social situation, cultural background and identity can have important impacts upon their educational outcomes. These links between socio-cultural factors and educational outcomes need to be better understood if schools are to meet the challenge of providing an educational environment conducive to maximising the opportunities for success for all students. Indeed, successful multicultural education should strive to provide educational access to students of all backgrounds in a manner that does not require the assimilation of minority students to the dominant societal culture (Kalantzis *et al.*, 1990: 10-11).

Victorian State educational policy argues that the school system is a major agent for social change, that plays "a very important role in the development of attitudes, values and critical thinking" and in confronting barriers to social participation (Department of Education, 1997). Schools are considered to be important sites where an individual's skills in participating in a culturally diverse society, engaging in critical thinking, and challenging structural prejudices are developed. The Victorian Government recognises, however, that increasingly culturally diverse educational environments pose significant challenges for schools in particular in ensuring inter-ethnic harmony and successful educational outcomes for all students.

Responding to both the challenges and benefits of culturally diverse education, the Victorian Government has developed the *Multicultural Policy for Victorian Schools* (1997) and the *Guidelines for Managing Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in Schools* (2001). These policies draw attention to the importance of multicultural education as a means of empowerment for young people of all backgrounds to fully participate in the lives of their local communities and “to develop as confident citizens of the world” (Department of Education, Employment and Training, 2001). Underpinning the policies are a number of principles including the valuing of diversity and cultural pluralism, the enrichment of all students through sharing experiences, perspectives and knowledge, and the development of “equality of access and opportunity” for all students (Department of Education, 1997; 2001).

Importantly, this policy recognises that curriculum content is only one, albeit important, aspect of multicultural education which is viewed as “a holistic approach to schooling that needs to permeate all parts of the curriculum and influence all school practices”. The Victorian Government is aiming for a 2006 target whereby all Victorian students “will have multicultural perspectives delivered across the eight key learning areas and incorporated into all aspects of school life”. Achieving such a target would seem to necessitate careful examination of the needs of culturally diverse student populations and the strengths and weaknesses of the current approaches to curriculum and pedagogy. Rigorous academic research can aid policy development beyond curriculum reform to institutional change in schools and address the specific needs of NESB students (Banks, 2001:3).

There is growing academic concern that generalised studies into the educational outcomes of NESB students do not reflect the often stark differences in educational attainment between ethnic groups (Kalantzis *et al*, 1990:3-5; Sturman 1997). The uneven distribution of positive educational outcomes amongst ethnic groups is under-researched and, therefore, not sufficiently understood. To fully understand the dynamics behind the differences in educational achievement in NESB students, it is “important to look at specific groups of students and examine some of the circumstances associated with their education in order to understand the factors behind their achievement or lack of it ... [I]t is important to consider the socio-economic and educational background of students, and their social, historical and educational context in Australia” (Suliman and McInerney, 2003:2). In other words, the social circumstances of specific NESB groups and the manner in which they are collectively perceived in the mainstream society cannot be ignored as critical factors in shaping the educational experiences of NESB students.

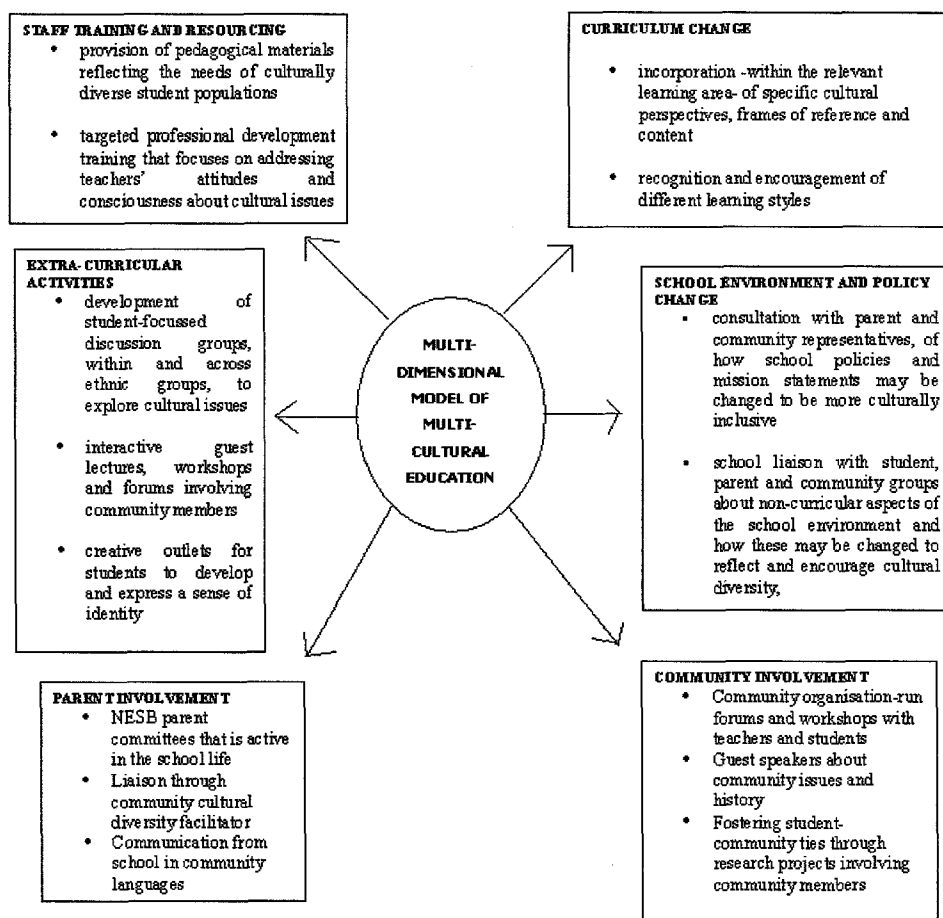
In fact, a closer examination of the 2001 Australian Bureau of Statistics data indicates that only 60% of Victorian second-generation ASB young people aged 29 years or below who have left school have completed Year 12 (ABS, 2001). In the local government areas where the two participating schools are located, the rate of high school non-completion by ASB young people is even higher. Studies of Lebanon-born Victorians show that this group has low post-school qualification levels when compared with the total Victorian population (VOMA, 2003). For example, three-quarters of Lebanon-born Victorians have no post-school qualifications, compared with around half for the total Victorian population (VOMA, 2003:2). While this project mainly concerns second-generation Arab-Australians, these statistics concerning the post-school qualifications of Lebanon-born Australians suggest that many of the students at Blackwood College and Clayfield Girls Secondary College come from families who have not accessed tertiary education.

### **Study Approach**

Current literature on cultural diversity in education suggests that there are numerous factors that contribute to successful multicultural education practices. These factors extend from individual staff practices, school-based curriculum, pedagogic choices, school-community relations, and broader structural factors such as educational policies and social environments. That is, current theorising around multicultural education tends to take a holistic approach that highlights the importance of all these factors and the way they interlink with each another. In light of the recent developments in theories of multicultural education, this study has developed and adopted a model of multicultural education which draws on the critical educationalist's view that education is both transformative and multi-dimensional.

The multidimensional aspect of the model in this study assumes that school education is experienced and influenced by a combination of factors. These relate to pedagogic choices, opportunities for social engagement, the involvement of families in their children's education, school resources, and by individual students' experiences and understanding of culture, identity and social background. The transformative dimension of the model recognises that students are disadvantaged by socially-constructed barriers to learning. In this sense, successful multicultural education requires change not only in NESB students, but more importantly, in the various dimensions of the educational system and the schools in order to break down these barriers.

Below is a diagrammatic representation of how the various dimensions of education may interact to reflect these perspectives:



## Study Design

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 other than academic research and secondary textual data. In fact, the primary data was based on interviews and questionnaires conducted with teachers, students and Arabic-speaking parents at the participating schools in separate sessions. Students were randomly selected and approached to participate in the research, with the necessary consent from their parents being a condition for participation. 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. At Blackwood College (BC), three focus groups were run, two with ASB students divided into gendered groups, and one with students from other backgrounds. At Clayfield Girls Secondary College (CGSC), two focus groups were run. In all the focus group discussions, students were of mixed ages ranging from 12 to 18.

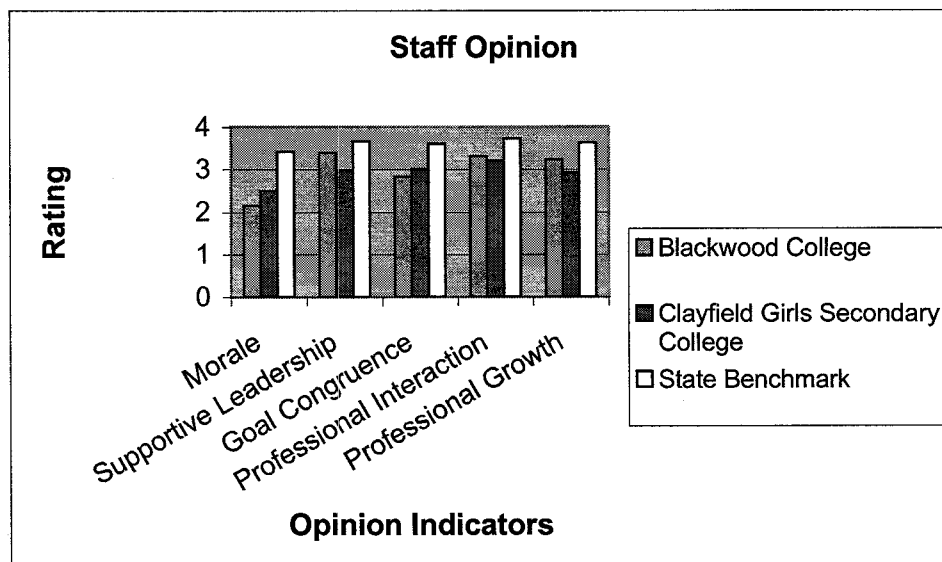
Students were asked a range of semi-structured questions relating to the themes of happiness,

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 their perception of their individual and collective identities vis-à-vis local and national communities. The questionnaires were analysed statistically while the focus group discussions and interviews were analysed qualitatively.

The majority of staff members at the participating schools have also completed a survey, comprising a demographic section, a short structured answer question and a written answer section. The structured questions related to themes of race, ethnicity and conflict at school as well as attitudes towards cultural diversity in the wider Australian society. The written answer section was designed to elicit responses from staff about their understanding of multicultural education, their school's and their own individual approaches to cultural diversity in education, and their experiences of cultural diversity within the schooling environment. One leadership staff member at each school has also been involved in an interview. Participating parents had the option of completing their survey in Arabic or English, and the focus group sessions were run in both Arabic

and English. Parents were asked to answer structured questions and discuss themes pertinent to

communication with the school, their communication with their children, and their desires



their involvement in the school community, their and aspirations for their children's education.

Table (1) below outlines the number of participants involved in this study:

Participants	Blackwood College	Clayfield Girls Secondary College	Subtotal
Students	25 Arabic-speaking background students (surveys and focus group) 11 non-Arabic speaking background students (surveys and focus group)	12 Arabic-speaking background students (surveys and focus group) 10 non-Arabic-speaking background students (surveys and focus group)	58 students
Staff	28 surveys 1 interview	27 surveys 1 interview	67 staff
Parents	3 surveys and group discussion	4 surveys and group discussion	7 parents
SUBTOTAL	68 participants	54 participants	
TOTAL	122 participants		

## Findings

The following is a summary of statistical findings followed by a qualitative discussion based on focus group discussions with students and parents. Given the limited scope of this paper, only those findings most relevant to this paper will be detailed.

## Schools

The data relating to staff opinions and morale is based on the yearly 'Attitude to School Surveys'. The analysis of the relevant segments shows that these schools are affected by low staff opinion of their professional environment. The Victorian Department of Education and Training measures staff opinion according to five indicators: staff perspectives on morale, supportive leadership, goal congruence, professional interaction and professional growth. Both schools fall well behind

the state benchmarks on all indicators, though staff opinion at the schools appears to be trending upwards. Table (2) below shows the levels of staff opinion in the schools compared with the state benchmarks in 2002. The maximum rating possible is five.

Interestingly, the staff from Blackwood College rated supportive leadership, personal interaction and professional growth slightly below the state benchmark and higher than the staff from Clayfield Girls Secondary College; while they rated morale and goal congruence well below the state benchmark and also below the ratings in the same category from staff at Clayfield Girls Secondary College.

## Students

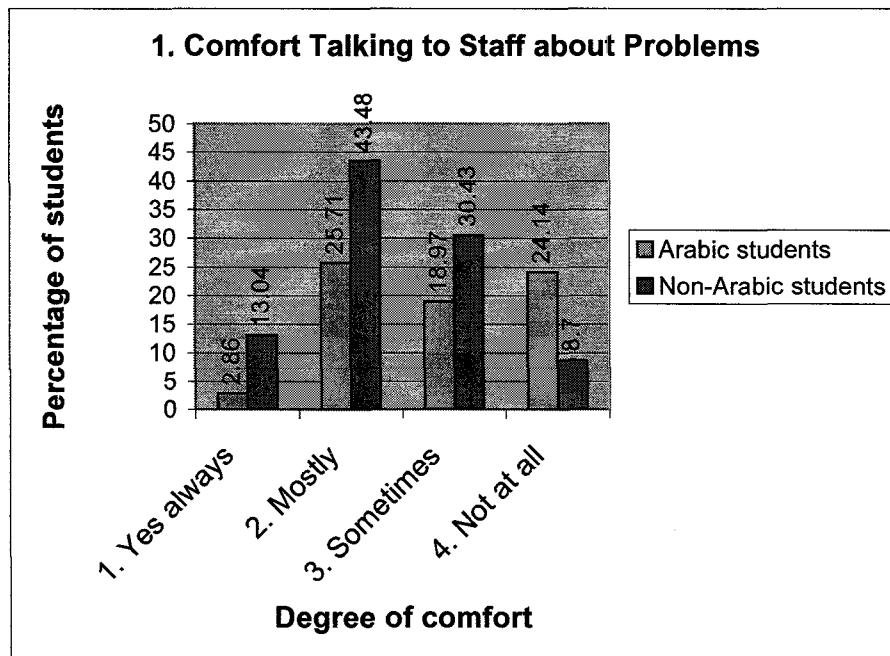
Given the limited scope of this paper and since the main focus is on ethnicity rather than gender, results relating to students questionnaires are grouped

collectively on the basis of ethnic background rather than gender attributes. The statistical comparison of questionnaire results between ASB and non-ASB yielded some surprising differences between the two groups. For example, ASB students indicated less comfort than non-ASB students in talking to staff members about problems they may be facing. Students were asked 'Do you feel comfortable talking with teachers, counsellors or other staff members about any problems that you may be having?'

Students could rank their answers from 1 (yes always), 2 (mostly), 3 (sometimes), to 4 (not at all).

On average ASB students answered 3.06 while non-ASB students answered 2.36, indicating a greater degree of comfort with talking to staff. Significantly, nearly one quarter (24.14%) of ASB students compared with only 8.7% of non-ASB selected 4 (not at all) for their degree of comfort talking to staff. 86.95% of non-ASB students compared to only 47.54% of ASB students replied that they either always, mostly or sometimes felt comfortable talking with staff about their problems.

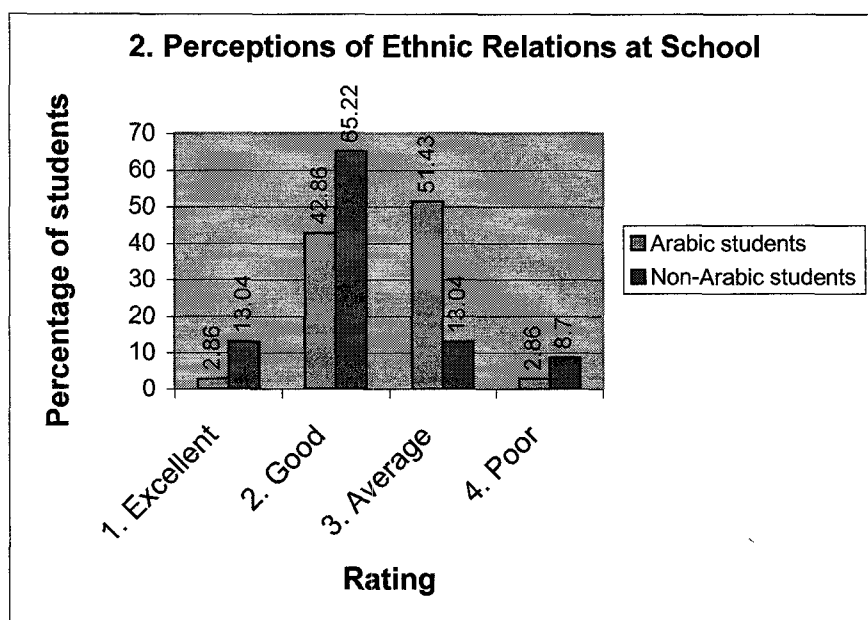
Table (3): Student-staff relationship:



Similarly, ASB students indicated less confidence in student harmony in their culturally diverse school. When asked to rate relations between different ethnic groups at their school, with 1 being

'excellent' and 4 being 'poor', ASB students answered 2.56 (close to 'average'), while non-ASB students answered 2.18 (close to 'good').

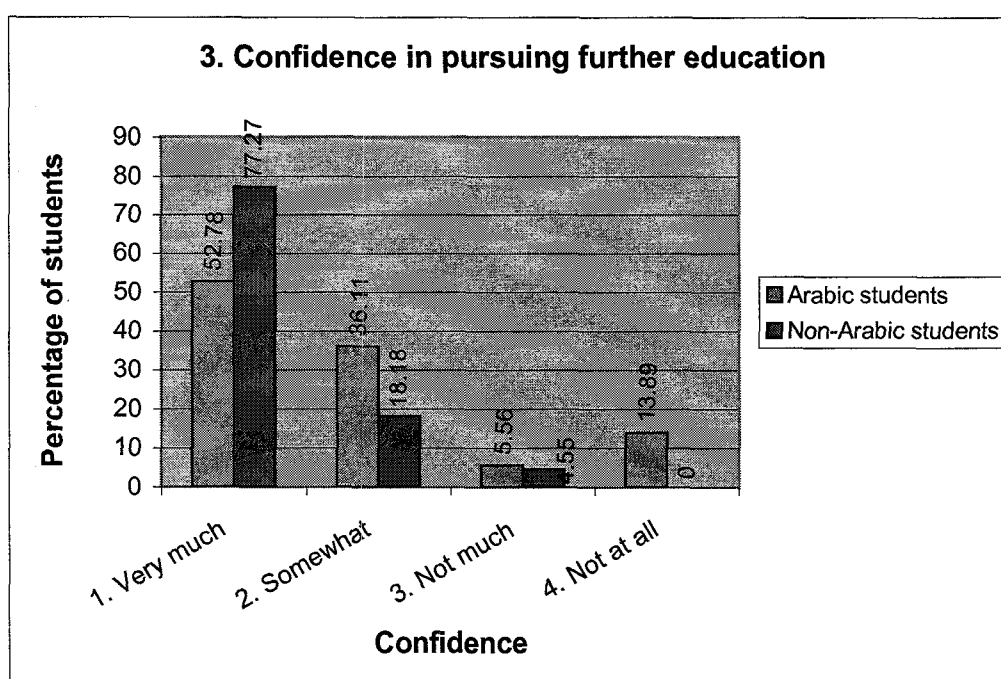
Table (4): Ethnic relations:



The above graph shows that 78.26% of non-ASB students compared with only 45.72% of ASB students replied that relations between different ethnic groups were excellent or good. The greatest proportion of non-ASB students (65.22 %) replied that relations between ethnic groups were good. The majority of ASB students (94.29%) answered that relations between ethnic groups were either good or average.

Moreover, ASB students were generally less confident that working hard at school would earn them a TAFE or university place. Students were asked 'Do you think that working hard at school will get you a university or TAFE place? The average result for ASB students was 1.89 (close to 'somewhat'), while the non-ASB students indicated more confidence with a result of 1.27 (close to 'yes, very much').

Table (5): Students' educational aspirations:



More than three quarters of non-ASB students compared with just over half of ASB students

believed that working hard at school would help 'very much' in obtaining a place at university or

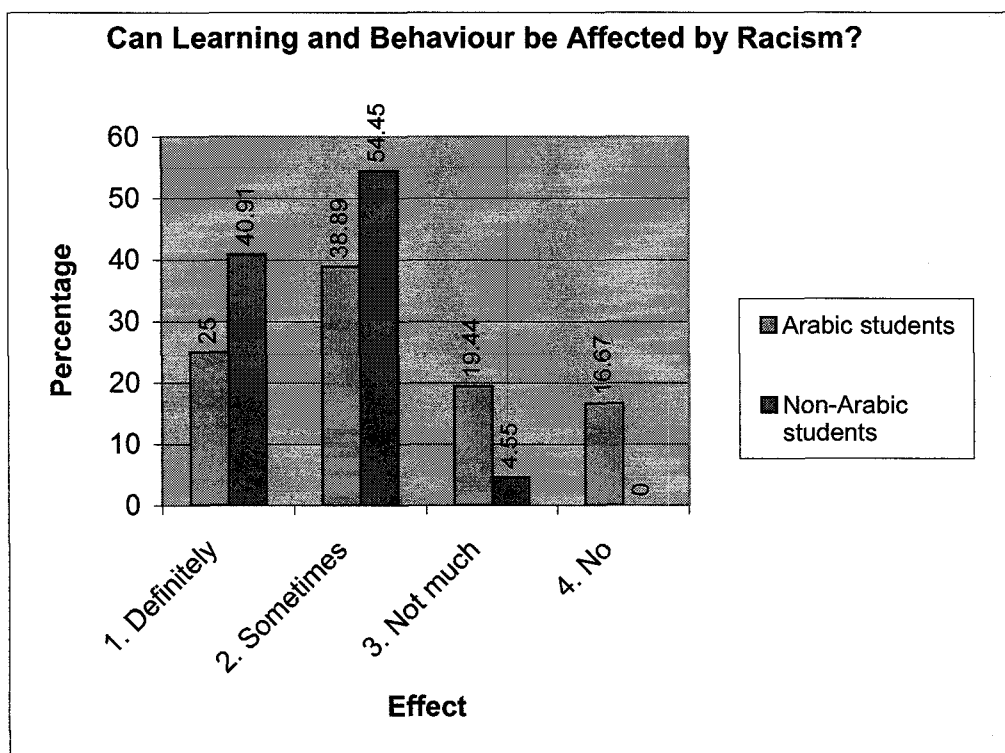
TAFE. At the other end of the confidence scale, just under one fifth of all ASB students (19.45%) compared to less than one twentieth non-ASB students (4.55%) believed that working hard at school would either 'not help much' or 'not at all' assist them in getting a university or TAFE place.

Students were then asked to comment on the impact of racism on learning and behaviour. The graph below shows student answers to the question: 'Do you think that student learning and behaviour can be affected by racism?' 1 indicated 'yes, definitely', 2 indicated 'sometimes', 3 was 'not much', and 4 meant 'no'. Non-ASB students answered on average at 1.64, while ASB students

answered at 2.28. The majority of non-ASB students (95.36%) compared to only 63.89% of ASB students replied that learning and behaviour at school can 'sometimes' or 'often' be affected by racism.

Interestingly a significant proportion of ASB students (36.11%) compared to only 4.55% of non-ASB students answered that racism could 'not affect at all' or 'not much' learning behaviours at school. This somewhat surprising response may be as a result of the existence of a defence mechanism or 'resistance identity' to combat racism as discussed above.

Table (6): Learning and racism:

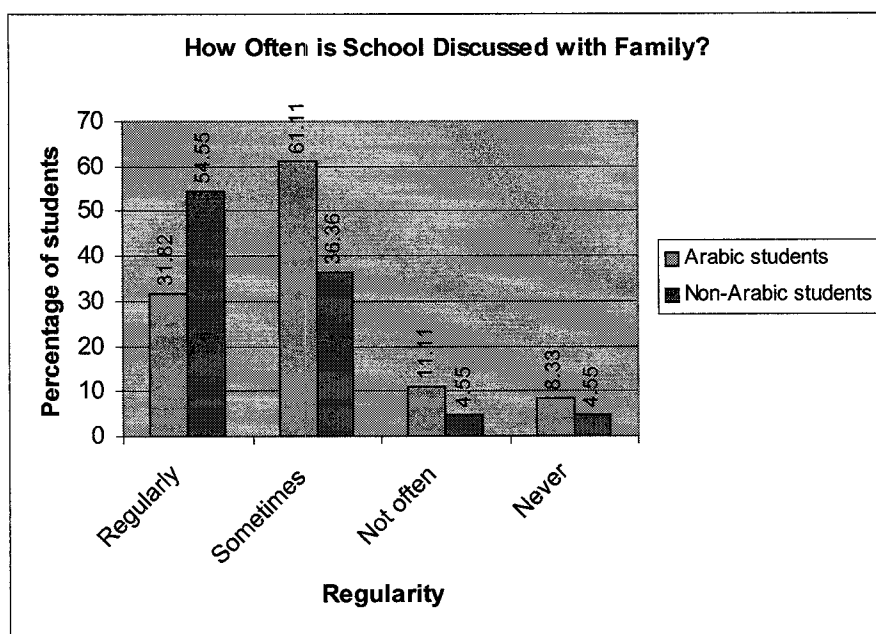


While all students reported that their families consider schooling to be important, on average non-ASB students talked more regularly with their families about school and study than ASB students. Students were asked 'Do you talk to you family about school and study?' and could respond 1 (yes regularly), 2 (sometimes), 3 (not very often) and 4 (never). ASB students answered 2.08 (sometimes),

while on average non-ASB students discussed school with their family more regularly, at 1.59. More than double the number of ASB students (19.44%) compared to non-ASB students (9.1%) either 'never' or 'not often' discuss school with their parents. The graph below indicates the breakdown of answers for each of the above questions:

Table (7): Family's interest in schooling:





### Focus Group Discussions

The statistical findings were confirmed in focus group discussions conducted for non-ASB students as well as separately for ASB boys and girls. During these group discussions ASB boys indicated that they found the school environment inert and unengaging, arguing that this dragged them back academically. ASB girls also argued that they should be encouraged more in their studies and that teachers should make more effort to engage them. The non-ASB students were generally more positive about teachers, though still reported negative feelings about the learning environment more generally. They felt that while there were 'some good' teachers, the general learning environment was non-academic and unengaging, subject selection too limited, school reputation poor, and studies unchallenging. While all students tended to think that their parents regarded education to be of importance, ASB students were less likely to discuss their education with their parents.

ASB students were very concerned about the 'perceived' increase in racism against Arabic and Muslim communities in Australia, associated with global and local events. The boys felt that the media vilified and misrepresented their culture, and that they were targeted by the police because of their cultural background. The girls discussed particular instances of racism, especially relating to wearing the *hijab* and some expressed a tension between their cultural roles and their educational ambitions.

This preliminary research suggests that ASB students and students from other backgrounds differ in key areas, particularly those relating to (a) teacher-student relations (ASB students were more likely to express distrust towards teachers, particularly based around a perceived lack of cultural understanding), (b) ideas of social cohesion

and interethnic relations at school, (c) confidence in achieving a tertiary place, (d) beliefs about whether racism affects learning and behaviour and (e), family emphasis upon education.

### Parents

Given the small number (only seven) of parents who completed the questionnaires for this phase of the research project, the following brief analysis of parents' attitudes and views is based solely on focus group discussions. Parents' discussion of the schools' communicative practices varied between the schools. One of the biggest issues arising from the discussions with parents at BC was that communication between the school and Arabic-speaking parents seemed to be somewhat hindered. A consistent suggestion was that the newsletter be printed in Arabic as well as English. Parents at CGSC were generally more positive about communication between the school and Arabic-speaking parents, commenting that this had improved significantly since the principal changed around three years ago. However, the newsletter is not printed in Arabic at CGSC either.

All participating parents valued the role of a community-based cultural diversity facilitator in aiding communicative practices between the school and Arabic-speaking families. Close personal relationships had obviously been built between the community cultural diversity facilitator and each of the Arabic-speaking participants, and it was particularly clear at BC that the parents who participated had been unlikely to visit the school, speak to staff or attend parent meetings before the community cultural diversity facilitator had carefully developed relationships with them. The parents at BC reported that aside from their considerable language barriers, other factors

hindering their participation in the school communities included extensive family commitments and a lack of resources available to their large families, including in some cases the ability to drive. From the community cultural diversity facilitator's experience at BC, many of the ASB students come from families with very traditional gender roles. She has difficulties, therefore, persuading fathers to be involved in the school community, as educative responsibilities tend to fall to the mothers. Many of the mothers had small children and found it difficult to come to the school during the day or at night. Parents at CGSC seemed better resourced and better positioned to actively engage in the school life. All were keen to be involved in school activities and meetings, particularly if these events were to be coordinated and run by the community cultural diversity facilitator. Most of the CGSC parents wanted more involvement in the school community, and more opportunities to be involved in decision-making at the school. They had clear ideas about what they wanted for their children's education.

## **Conclusion**

The fundamental purpose of education is to ensure that all students, irrespective of linguistic, cultural or socio-economic background or other factors benefit from learning in ways that facilitate their full participation in public, community and economic life. This preliminary research suggests that the educational and social experiences of ASB and non-ASB students differ on a number of levels. In fact, they differ in the key areas relating to teacher-student relations, perceptions of interethnic relations at school, confidence in achieving a tertiary place, beliefs about whether racism affects learning and behaviour and family emphasis upon and attitudes towards education. ASB students were more likely to express distrust towards teachers, particularly based around a perceived lack of cultural understanding. They were less confident in their abilities to achieve education or training beyond secondary school, and were more likely to hold more limited educational ambitions than students from other backgrounds. While all students tended to think that their parents regarded education to be of importance, ASB students were less likely to discuss their education with their parents.

Some ASB students, particularly young women, expressed a tension between their cultural roles and their educational ambitions. The research also shows that ASB young people, particularly boys, are concerned about the levels of racism and discrimination they face in a broader social context. This last point is especially important given the negative impact social marginalisation and exclusion can have on one's sense of worth and belonging.

The belief by around one fifth (20%) of ASB students that racism does not affect or has little impact on learning or behaviour may be indicative of the attitude found by Collins *et al.* amongst young Muslim-Australians who tend to bond together in order to avoid coming into contact with racism and exclusion from the mainstream society.

The findings of this study confirm earlier research (e.g., Kalantzis *et al.*, 1990) findings that pointed to social barriers preventing minority group participation in schools, including not being in the position to devote time to such participation when their work and economic survival demands were overwhelming. Moreover, the inclination of NESB parents to participate in decision-making about education was not always high for various reasons, including a cultural positioning of the teacher as a revered figure of authority, and particular views about the desired strictness and rigidity of curriculum. This can produce unforeseen consequences, in which school expectations of parental involvement may actually lead to more tension and disengagement. In addition, community participation may upset a school's philosophy, resulting in a struggle between families and educators. This research, however, suggests that community involvement through a structured and well-defined facilitator can enhance the school's capacity to manage cultural diversity in a positive manner.

The multidimensional model adopted in this study recognises the inter-dependent nature of the learning experience and the critical role of social and cultural factors in shaping educational achievements of ASB students and NESB students in general. The findings of the above analysis confirm the basic principle of the model namely that the comparative lower achievements of ASB students generally reflect their attitudes towards their social and cultural environment and their parents' understanding of schooling policies and attitudes towards education achievements. The positive views expressed regarding the community-based facilitator support the model's focus on the importance of bridging the gap between schools and their immediate communities, particularly where these communities are facing considerable economic and social obstacles. The model adopted in this study has been useful in analysing the many factors influencing educational outcomes for ASB students in addition to providing a 'transformative' model to effect positive change in the school environment, both at the social and the educational levels. For this to be achieved an integrated approach will need to be adopted where schools, parents and communities form a strategic partnership aimed at reducing the effects of social barriers and the challenge of cross-cultural negotiation.

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