Beyond harmony: rethinking intercultural learning for Australian primary schools

> Living with difference is an unavoidable part of social existence in the twenty-first century everywhere (Ang 2008, p. 230).

This paper addresses the role of primary schools in helping children learn how to get to know and get along with people they perceive to be different from themselves. It draws on a research project conducted over a twelve-month period in 2006 and 2007 in four primary schools in the Australian Capital Territory. It argues that in a diverse, changing and uncertain world, learning to live together should be as foundational in the primary curriculum as literacy and numeracy. Reimagining ways of seeing and being together, the paper advocates an intercultural approach to education that moves beyond harmony, recognition, appreciation and tolerance of others. It calls for positive interaction and the mediation of difference in situations that are both real and significant for all primary school students incorporating personal, interpersonal and social orientations.

The way we do things around here

I begin with two examples illustrating aspects of thinking and practice about society and culture often evident in 'the way we do things around here' in primary schools.

Concentric circles thinking

The first of these I call concentric circles thinking. It refers to a way of structuring learning in social education based on the portrayal of students at the centre of a set of concentric circles that represent the ever-widening worlds that children enter as they grow up (Figure 1). You start with the child and work your way out. As a teacher I found this a useful frame of reference in developing social education curriculum and specific units of work because it supported the idea of moving from known and familiar worlds to the unknown and the new, starting with family and friends in early childhood years to the local community in middle primary, the nation and the region in senior primary years. Circles could be added or subtracted to incorporate specific areas of study such as the school as a subset of neighbourhood, the state or the region. It provided a simple and

sensible structure. But it also constructed these worlds and the relationships between them as orderly, fixed and stable.
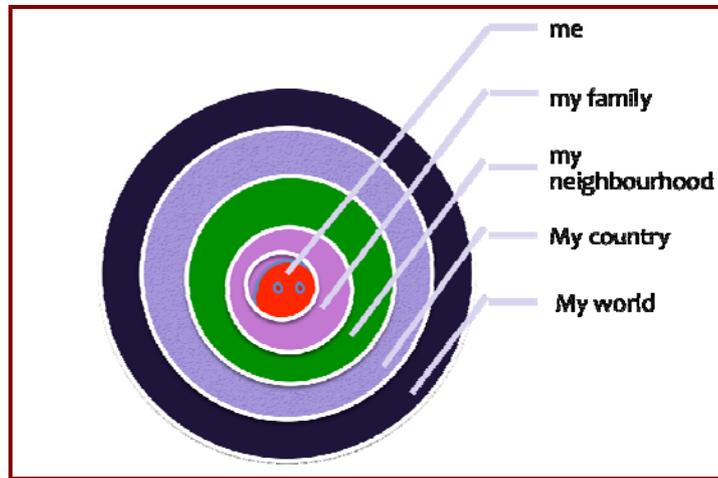

Figure 1: concentric circles thinking

But children's worlds are no longer like this, if they ever were. The world has changed and people's lives have changed with it. We cannot assume students in our classes live in single nuclear family units. Their associations outside the family are not necessarily within their local neighbourhoods. Social bonds are forged through their membership of many different groups. Through the media and from an early age children are exposed to worlds far beyond their front door. In a global age, worlds intersect and the edges between them are blurred (Figure 2). This was brought home to me in one of the classes in my research project when a seven-year old boy, looking at a photo of a Thai girl, registered her contemporary dress and observed, "I see Hello Kitty's got to Thailand".
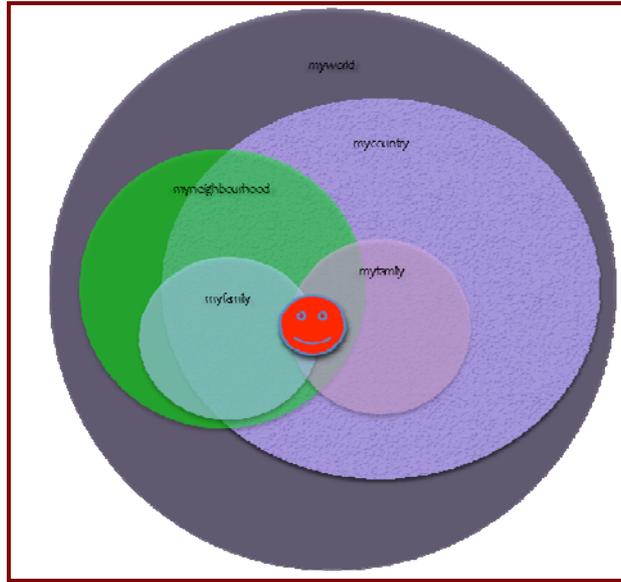
Figure 2: Intersecting worlds

It may seem self-evident but concentric circles are clearly inadequate representations of the complexity and interconnectedness of the worlds and times in which we now live. The challenge for education is to develop curriculum that reflects the realities and complexities of children's lives and worlds, and the demands they are likely to face in the future. It is no longer possible to imagine that social education units begin with the family in kindergarten and work their way out to the wider world as students progress through school.

In describing the worldliness of the children in her year 3 class, a teacher from Ridge Primary School stated, "These kids do have a world view. They are aware there's a drought. They're aware that there are people at war". The same teacher contrasted this outlook with that of children from her previous school who "were all white kids who didn't know anything bigger than (their suburb)". She speculated "this (intercultural education) wouldn't be so relevant … to those kids in my class who didn't know anything about any of them (different cultures) …because for those junior primary kids, it is hard, if they've not ever experienced it, even the people next door being a different culture". At Valley Primary, one early childhood teacher, though stating intercultural education was extremely important, only nominated scripture and Christmas activities as places for its incorporation in the curriculum. She added that it could be more appropriate "in older groups once skills are established".

I contend that an awareness of and interest in the world around them and a capacity to relate to and communicate with diverse groups of people is not just relevant but essential for all children irrespective of their background and age. Learning to live together in a diverse world should be as fundamental to the primary school curriculum as literacy and numeracy. Such learning focuses on people and their relationships, bringing me to my second example - Harmony Day.

Harmony Day

Harmony Day began in 1999 as an initiative of the Australian Government, which provides promotional materials such as posters, stickers and ribbons. For several years the official slogan for Harmony Day was "You + Me = Us". According to the Department of Immigration's website the aims of the program evolved to meet the changing needs of the Australian community. So much so that the previous federal government's *Living in Harmony Programm*e has morphed into the *Diverse Australia Program* with the change of government. Though Harmony Day remains, its purpose or key message has also changed from building social cohesion through respect, participation, a sense of belonging and Australian values to community participation, inclusiveness, respect and a sense of belonging for everyone (http://www.harmony.gov.au).

For many schools, Harmony Day is the only occasion in the year when cultural diversity is celebrated. At Ridge Primary, the messages teachers were hoping to convey throughout Harmony Day were that we should all get along together, show respect for one another and celebrate our community. As Harmony Day occurs early in the school year, arrangements for the day were hurried, with children having no input into the activities. During the day, they participated in four activities - playing cooperative games, making awards for people they considered outstanding in their community, making paper chains of people holding hands and making a banner of the Harmony Day slogan You + Me = Us from paper that they crumpled (Figure 3). Children were asked to wear orange to school and parents were invited to a shared lunch. The organised activities were one-offs to mark a Special Day. They were largely symbolic and it is difficult to gauge what students learnt from their participation in them.

At the end of the day, teachers thought the day had gone well, creating, in the words of one teacher, "a fantastic atmosphere" … until lunchtime. It seems the children in the four classes involved in Harmony Day activities had not played together before and

some of the boys decided to play a game of soccer together. The trouble started when one of the boys put his leg out and another tripped over it. Even through the ensuing fight the meaning of the day was not entirely abandoned with one of the participants saying he just wanted to hug people. After all, it was Harmony Day.

Harmony Day at Ridge Primary promoted belonging and getting along together in a self-contained community, fulfilling the objectives the Australian Government identified for the occasion. That the day lacked any representation of or interaction with anyone outside the school did not seem to matter. Even so, interaction that is not tightly controlled can get out of hand. In the heat of the moment, when a leg gets extended and someone trips over, interaction suddenly gets close and personal and the message You + Me = Us flies out the window.

Figure 3: Harmony Day banner

Cultural diversity is generally met with good will and the best of intentions in education but is given low priority in policy commitments and is treated superficially in most school programs. But tolerance and appreciation limit what is required of the society at large, inferring that the primary responsibility for social cohesion and inclusion lies with newcomers and outsiders rather than being a reciprocal responsibility across all social and cultural groups.

Until recently in Australian schools, teaching about cultural diversity has mostly been the province of multicultural education, often interpreted as being about minority cultures and studied through 'kilts and cakes' or ' heroes and holidays' approaches. In general terms, most teachers' interest and engagement in intercultural experience has been peripheral at best. In an analysis of State and Territory languages education curriculum frameworks, Liddicoat et al. (2003) state that:

> At times, culture is connected to students' immediate learning context; however, it tends to be associated with students of non-English-speaking background. This treatment has the effect of locating culture with 'others' and diminishing or rendering invisible the place of one's own culture and of the concept of C-ulture in general (p. 40).

This observation reveals a basic problem in how cultural learning has frequently been approached in Australian schools, presented as the province of 'others', with little attempt at deep learning whereby students consider their own cultural beliefs and practices and how these might connect to the experiences of others. Students are constituted as observers of other cultures (enriched but otherwise unaffected by them) but not participants in direct intercultural experience, thus promoting "a passive form of multiculturalism where tolerance rather than participation in 'otherness' tend to dominate (Liddicoat, Lo Bianco and Crozet, 1999, p. 2)".

Educational approaches that cast students solely as observers of other cultures too often restrict their gaze to the commonalities between people, promoting cultural tolerance and appreciation but refusing to countenance controversy or conflict. Lil's assessment of the unit of work on communities at Ridge Primary was that "we were looking on the outside, not doing and finding it". She identified the unit's main shortcoming as its lack of an action orientation. If she were to do the unit again she would choose something real with a current affairs or issues focus, more geared to showing students that their "actions have an effect on the community". Too rarely do teachers step outside the confines of the school grounds to engage their classes constructively or meaningfully with the world beyond their classrooms.

thinking differently
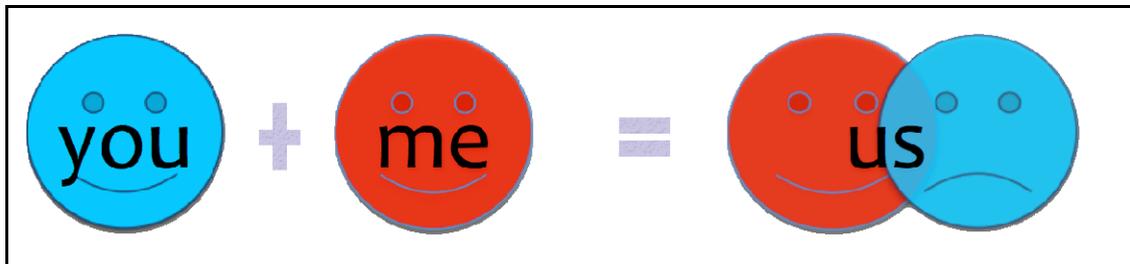
You plus me equals us

Given my critique of Harmony Day above, it might seem somewhat ironic that I have chosen its slogan (you plus me equals us) to reconsider approaches to cultural diversity in the primary curriculum. As well as highlighting the use of personal pronouns, the slogan suggests that the interaction between the personal (me) and the interpersonal (you) results in a social consciousness that is neither you nor I but together becomes us. It foregrounds and combines personal, interpersonal and social relationships. Thinking about social education in these terms takes account of individual and social purposes of education and, importantly, not only adds a third element 'you' but puts it first. The complexity of these three perspectives, their relationship to one another and their possibilities and limitations are at the crux of the approach I wish to explore.

You

Starting with the Other rather than the self casts what comes after in a different light. In one sense, it is based on the proposition that "a person is a person only in relation to another person" (p. 9), that is, you come to know yourself only through others by developing and maintaining a relationship with the 'not me', thus asserting the primacy of the relationship between the self and the Other, Levinas' (1985) 'party of two'. This is a relationship of ethics. Whether I choose to acknowledge it or not, I am compelled by an unconditional responsibility for the Other, prompting me the ask, "what if, instead of explaining our responsibilities in terms of its effect on me or us, we simply started with the needs of the other?" (Manderson 2001, p. 4). Knowledge requires in the first instance an openness to something new, something foreign or something totally other beyond the self. Todd (2001) states that "the approach to knowledge implies first and foremost an ethical relation to difference; that is, what we learn is conditioned upon an initial susceptibility to what is outside and exterior to us" (p. 68). Therefore, the

orientation in social education becomes learning from the Other with curiosity, openness and ignorance, Hall (2006) underlines the importance of openness to what may be unfamiliar, foreign or strange, suggesting that "in this global moment we can't close ourselves".

In another sense, starting with the Other brings about a shift in thinking from the personal to the interpersonal, focusing on what happens between people rather than simply who they are, a distinction Kalantzis and Cope (2005) describe as follows:

> The personal is about shaping oneself in the image of others, recognising oneself in one's similarity with other models of gender or national identity, and making oneself into one person. The interpersonal is about negotiating differences, and in a world of growing differences this is about strategies for finding common ground, collaborating with strangers and the morality of compromise (p. 24).

Me

The relationship between self and other is reciprocal. As one learns from others so one grows in self-knowledge and in order to understand others one needs to "work on oneself" (Abdallah-Pretceille 2006, p. 477). It is as though there are two energies: one that comes from 'me' that actively projects me outwards to the world with curiosity and fellow feeling; and another that comes from 'not me' that exposes my susceptibility and openness to the Other and that prompts me to attend to the world with ignorance and humility.

In education policy and school practice selfhood is most commonly equated with the individual that, consequently, give priority to personal learning. A variety of personal benefits and outcomes are cited in education policy and research, for example, in the *Melbourne Declaration* (MCEETYA 2008) the student is depicted as a successful learner and a creative and confident individual. Kalantzis and Cope (2005) identify the development of persons of stable and resilient identity and the Cambridge Primary Review (Alexander 2009) names four personal qualities and capacities and individual needs - wellbeing, engagement, empowerment and autonomy - as among the key purposes and aims of school education.

Touraine (2007) asserts the need for education to be focussed primarily on individual rather than social benefits, providing young people with the capability to be actors in

their own lives rather than victims of it, to resist forces that impinge on their right to be themselves, and to demand recognition and respect. Touraine goes further, claiming that in an era when people's personal lives are increasingly disconnected from the society in which they live, "the will to be ourselves and to create and defend ourselves as individuals, with all our roots and branches, and in the full awareness that we are a tree, is now the only principle that can guide our behaviours and allow us to tell good from evil" (2009, p. 199).

Us

In moving to 'us', the focus shifts from the personal and the interpersonal to the social, encompassing notions of belonging, solidarity and shared values. The slogan, you plus me equals us, conveys the idea that it is the process of interaction or exchange between you and me that generates a sense of collective or shared identity. The extension of relationships from the interpersonal to the social introduces a political dimension (Bauman & Tester 2001) that in democratic societies is formalised in the notion of citizenship and is promoted through social goals such as cohesion, inclusion and cultural diversity. As a society we are faced with the question of how we live together to meet the diverse needs of individuals and groups in a complex, uncertain and changing world. For education this becomes a question of how schools might best support students in learning to live together across difference.

However the message the slogan sends is fundamentally limited because it excludes others, completely overlooking their existence. The questions, who is considered as 'us' and who is 'not us', who is included and who is excluded, who belongs and who does not, draw attention to an obvious conceptual gap and the potential to manipulate notions of identity. For instance, are illegal non-citizens, or the refugee child referred to by a previous Minister for Immigration as 'it' 'us'?

In any discussion of social relationships and more specifically in thinking about how schools might work with cultural diversity, the existence of 'in' groups and 'out' groups, or 'us' and 'them', must not be ignored. Bringing in a third party upsets the neat equation of you + me = us. It unsettles our assumed unity by introducing uncertainty and the unknown in the guise of the stranger or the outsider. It seems to me that getting to know and get along with the person who is 'not us' and who we perceive to be different from 'us' is the principal reason for going beyond harmony.

Beyond harmony

In imagining social and cultural learning that goes beyond harmony I begin with several strategies and activities in order to illustrate what intercultural learning might look like in practice.

1: Your silhouette is mine

This activity and activity 3 come from *Learning to Live Together An Intercultural and Interfaith Programme for Ethics Education* (Interfaith Council on Ethics Education for Children, Global Network of Religions for Children, & Foundation 2008).

In pairs students draw their silhouettes. Each student writes on their own silhouette a thought (on the head), a feeling (on the heart), a need (on the stomach), a desire to do something (on the hands) and an activity they enjoy (on the feet). They then share this information with their partner, describing each thought, feeling, need, desire and activity without explaining why. Next, students lie down in their partner's silhouettes, closing their eyes and trying to imagine their partner's thoughts, feelings, needs and desires and the things they enjoy as if they were their own. The purpose of the activity is to "understand and appreciate other people's **perspectives**" (p. 69). It is **interactive** and **reflective**, requiring students to **listen** to and **learn from** one another as well as **learn about** one another. It taps into their capacity for **empathy** and strengthens interpersonal **connections**.

2. Real-life stories

Stories engage the **imagination** and allow students to enter worlds far removed from their own, to gain some insight into the lives of others. Though they may connect aspects of the story with their own lives, readers can never fully understand the "particular experiences and **perspectives** of another", therefore remaining at a **distance** as an outsider or **onlooker**. Students reading *Home to Mother* (Pilkington Garimara 2006), the true story of three young Aboriginal girls' escape from the Moore River Native Settlement and long journey home following the rabbit roof fence, are unlikely to find themselves in the situation of the three children in the story. However, they may have experienced the trauma of family separation in their own lives and can learn from the resilience, enterprise and courage of the three protagonists. They are also exposed to

an Australian story that is not part of the mainstream cannon so they will be able to say, "I know these people. They're **not me** but they are **part of my global world**" (Hall 2006).

3: Development of projects

Social action projects involve students "in **transforming** a situation around them" (Interfaith Council on Ethics Education for Children et al. 2008, p. 121). They should include experiences between individuals and groups that generate **interaction** and require **negotiation**, recognising that joint projects carried out with a **common goal**, offer ideal opportunities for diverse groups to learn to **get along** and **manage conflict** (Reynolds & Turner 2001). Projects need to meet specific criteria. For instance, projects would need to:

- bring two cultures into a **relationship** to do something together for a common purpose;
- give participants **control** over the nature and level of their **participation**;
- ensure that participants have an agreed role in **decisions** concerning the project;
- have a set completion date; and
- be solution-oriented

For example, students from schools in different geographic locations and with different population mixes may work together to develop a campaign addressing a mutually agreed local or global issue around children's rights or the environment.

4: Persona Dolls

Persona or diversity dolls (MacNaughton 2006; Ridley 2006) have their own physical characteristics, personalities and life histories, representing the diverse ethnic, religious, social and cultural backgrounds of the people students are likely to encounter in at some point in their lives. For students in relatively culturally homogenous classes and communities they offer opportunities for cultural **interaction** that otherwise may not be available to them.

Through the teacher, the dolls tell stories about their lives, allowing students to explore ways of life that are different from their own and to discuss issues concerning **diversity**, **discrimination** and **equity** in a **non-threatening** manner. The dolls give young students the opportunity to discover what they have in common with people from different

backgrounds, to **empathise** with the situations they describe and to work through **problems** or **disagreements** in the **safety** of a once-removed relationship.

Imagining an intercultural curriculum

In describing possible characteristics for intercultural learning in the activities above I am not recommending one-off or ad hoc activities, but that we think about what we do in different ways, highlighting the reciprocity of relationships and developing a sense of responsibility for others as well as oneself. The activities work with an approach that seeks to go beyond harmony, highlighting dispositions and skills such as: an openness to many ways of seeing the world; the interaction and connection between individuals and groups across difference; empathy both for those close to us and distant from us, limited by the recognition that we can never fully know or understand others; and the capacity to take action, to negotiate and accommodate difference and disagreement. All activities derive from the basic idea that:

> To act interculturally is to bring into a relationship two cultures, the values, beliefs and behaviours of two groups of people (Byram 2006, p. 4).

In the belief that intercultural learning cannot be separated from the rest of the curriculum or from the life of the school, I envisage an intercultural curriculum for primary schools that is based on the social pillar of learning - learning to live together (Delors 1996). It would:

- stimulate students' interest in the lives of others based on shared experience, interaction, reciprocity and respect between different cultural groups;

- not shy away from controversy or conflict, recognising that working with cultural diversity is likely to be "difficult and challenging" as well as "exciting and fascinating" (Byram 2006, p. 5); and

- support students to develop the skills, knowledge, dispositions and capabilities to get to know and get along with people they see as different from themselves in learning to live together in a culturally diverse and interconnected world.

Inevitably, any approach has its risks and drawbacks. In my research project I took the view that it was possible to work with an intercultural approach in any unit of work that

had people in it. However, this alone is not enough. It still allows for learning that is superficial or tokenistic and for teachers to choose safe topics avoiding controversy or the requirement to go beyond the classroom. At a national level, the inclusion of intercultural understanding as one of ten capabilities in work on the national curriculum, though encouraging, risks being swamped and lost in more pressing demands within traditional disciplines.

Other approaches include implementing specific programs to address cultural diversity, such as the intercultural and interfaith programme *Learning to Live Together* (Interfaith Council on Ethics Education for Children et al. 2008) or introducing new strands to existing programs such as the proposed addition of a strand entitled *Identity and Diversity: Living Together in the UK* to the civics curriculum in the United Kingdom.

Intercultural learning is not simply a body of knowledge corralled within a single discipline or skills that once taught can be ticked off and forgotten. Nor is it an optional extra. If we are to take the demands of intercultural learning seriously, recognising its importance for all students, then we must think and act differently in terms of education policy, curriculum and in school-based practice. Most importantly, we need to ensure the *Melbourne Declaration's* (MCEETYA 2008) statement that the nation values education because of its role in building a prosperous, cohesive and culturally diverse society that values Indigenous cultures is clearly articulated and enacted in the national curriculum, in state and territory curriculum frameworks, and in schools on a daily basis not just on Special Days.

Conclusion

An intercultural curriculum for primary schools addresses learning to live together that, in a culturally diverse and interconnected world, must be a concern and priority for everyone. It calls for a response to cultural diversity that goes beyond harmony to the development of relationships based on mutual respect and responsibility. It views students as enactors and creators of their own cultures rather than simply as recipients of a given culture and observers of other cultures, encouraging their senses of autonomy and empowerment. Informed by the principles of engagement, connection, interaction, empathy, perspective and self-knowledge, it seeks to develop in students the

knowledge, skills, and understandings they need in learning to live together in the global now.

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