

Multiculturalism's forgotten dream

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Diversity has continued to characterize the social make up of most societies, yet the response seems to be a retreat from the principles that ought to inform the education of young people in such societies. The issue is not just an Australian one, although off-shore detention centers for asylum seekers and the anti-Muslim rhetoric of the One Nation Party construct Australia in a distinctive anti-diversity context. Such a context runs counter to Australia's multiculturalism that was hailed as a specific national achievement. It was Malcolm Fraser, Australia's Conservative Prime Minister in the late 1970s and early 80s, who proclaimed multiculturalism's benefits:

multiculturalism is concerned with far more than the passive toleration of diversity. It sees diversity as a quality to be actively embraced, a source of social dynamism. It encourages groups to be open and to interact, so that all Australians may learn and benefit from each other's heritages. Multiculturalism is about diversity, not division—it is about interaction not isolation (Speech at the Opening of the Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs in 1981)

As he argued in other parts of his address, Australia really had no choice but to embrace multiculturalism given its immigration program in the post World War II period and his own government's policy on asylum seekers and refugees in the 1970s. He pointed out even then that with the composition

of the Australian population changing radically, there were still those on both sides of politics who did not want to lose the "British" character of Australia and Australians. We continue to hear those voices today; but whereas they were once muted they are now louder. Where they were once on the fringes these voices now seem to be front and centre, including in the media. Fraser's vision of a dynamic and interacting multiculturalism has faded, replaced by a loud and belligerent nationalism. One Nation may be regarded as a fringe party but its stated objective, "to abolish multiculturalism and the Racial Discrimination Act and promote assimilation, nationalism, loyalty and pride in being an Australian" sends a clear message that Australia's diversity is now seen by some as a threat, so much so that it becomes targeted for abolition. If this were just an Australian phenomenon, reasons for it might be found in the local context. Yet anti-diversity attitudes are not just confined to Australia—they are international in their reach.

This can be seen in the discourse related to Brexit in which a key issue pushed relentlessly by the Leave campaign was immigration and free movement across the European Union and the way it had destroyed the 'British' way of life. The recent French election saw Marie Le Pen, the leader of the far right National Front Party that favored French nationalism over Europeanism, selected in the first round of the election as a serious candidate in the subsequent presidential election (that she subsequently lost). Donald Trump's election in the USA, after a divisive election campaign, signaled a victory for right wing groups and his recent initial refusal to criticize neo-Nazis and their white supremacist agenda has caused further division across the political spectrum. The ongoing refugee crisis in Europe has brought out the very worst of European fascism in countries like Hungary and has brought similar groups to the surface in the Netherlands, Austria and Germany. As societies become more diverse, so too does opposition to diversity. As international mobility becomes more

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ubiquitous, whether by raft in the Mediterranean or other more traditional modes of transport, there is a pushback that seeks the status quo and a return to ‘the ways things used to be’. Malcolm Fraser’s vision of a country enriched by cultural interactions and dynamics has been replaced by a timid and small world unable to confront realities and seeking refuge in an imagined past. Multiculturalism’s dream has been forgotten in this new environment.

It was against this background that the current Point and Counterpoint was developed. It seems important to try and gain an international perspective since so much of what is happening can be observed on a global scale. It often seems that Australia’s treatment of asylum seekers is particularly horrendous—and it is. Yet watching the treatment many asylum seekers leaving Libya, Iraq and Syria receive from different European countries shows that Australia is not alone in its anti-diversity policies. The most vulnerable people in the world who have no power, just a will to find a better life, are always up against rejection and intolerance irrespective of their destination. Anti-diversity environments are everywhere, so this Point and Counterpoint has included international cases to try and reach a better understanding of what is happening.

I do not wish to summarize the different contributions here—each is unique and speaks for itself. Each one comes out of a distinctive context and is a response to that context. Yet there are some underlying themes that are worth exploring, and they are themes for us all to reflect on and try to understand. In particular, we need to think what these themes mean for teaching and learning in our schools.

What seems to be at the heart of all the contributions are two main concepts: difference and power. Across countries, there remains enormous ambiguity about how to respond to difference—ambiguity for governments and for individuals. Some countries with decades of experience with policies favoring multiculturalism (Australia, the USA and Great Britain) now find themselves with contexts where difference is no longer seen as a positive attribute. The Australian case provides a micro-context relating to teacher professionalism, the USA case looks at the big picture across the country and the Great Britain case is a response to a new and dangerous policy environment. All of these cases point to the way in which difference has

become a threat resulting in anti-diversity environments of different types. In societies such as Korea and Hong Kong, multiculturalism is relatively new and has had to confront historic ethnic homogeneity with results that are not promising. Current responses to difference, therefore, undermine the multicultural dream making it a point of contention within societies rather than a rallying cry for extolling the benefits of diversity.

Governments play multiple roles and it is difficult to locate the locus of power. Do they reflect public opinion or do they create it? The Korean government in the example given below recognizes the need for multiculturalism but this does not stop the emergence of an anti-multicultural movement in society. The British government in its rush to protect citizens from what it sees as terrorist threats either wittingly or unwittingly demonizes and marginalizes elements of its diverse population—protecting what is seen as the common good in this case wins out over individual rights and freedom. The Hong Kong government will not even acknowledge the diversity of its society and, therefore, ethnic minority students continue to be forced into an assimilationist model of acculturation. Governments do use their power to create anti-diversity environments but they do not always do this—and as the Korean case shows, it is not a given. At the same time, however, citizens can also push back against what they see as unfairness and injustice in anti-diversity—the recent protests against the neo-Nazis in Charlottesville showed this as did the push back against President Trump’s refusal to unreservedly condemn right wing fanaticism. Thus, power cuts both ways—it can be pro-diversity or anti-diversity, it can be demonstrated at both macro- and micro-levels and it can have both positive and negative effects. The consensus liberal democratic societies once thought they had has disappeared. Support for diversity is up for grabs, and increasingly it seems it is being grabbed by those who wish to turn the clock back to the “good old days” when we were all the same. Yet we are not all the same, and the challenge for educators is to work out how to develop positive student attitudes to difference, to teach about the evils of racism and prejudice and to reclaim the diversity debate. This may be the most significant challenge of our time.