Forming School Identities in the Context of Increasing Community Diversity

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Abstract: If identity is culturally constructed, then the context in which it develops impacts on its stability during a time of social change. Within Aotearoa/New Zealand, communities are experiencing multiple forms of change due to the repercussions of political, economic and social policies. A further significant transformation is that of the ethnic composition of communities, instantiated by the Auckland metropolis. While communities are evaluating levels of social and economic sustainability, principals within secondary schools are also grappling with a school character that is dynamic, complex and challenging. It is within such school communities that benefit is gained from proactive leadership strategies that facilitate social cohesion. Conceptually, if identity relates to both the 'internal experience of place and external participation in world and society' (Cockburn, 1983, p. 1) then school identity should provide an inclusive environment whereby students can belong to the school while retaining their own sense of cultural self. This paper refers to the research findings of an international study, to show that while deliberate practices can draw together diverse groups to achieve social inclusion, tension exists when the focus is not fully multi-dimensional.

Keywords: School Identity, Multiculturalism, Inclusion

Introduction

IDENTITY AS A social construct can have varied and diverse interpretations depending upon the context in which it is applied. When identity is viewed through a cultural lens, then its complexity increases further. However, understanding how people perceive themselves and their place in the world is crucial to explaining the nature of, and social dynamism within, communities. The influence of global migrations has resulted in changing communities as people seek new lands in which to settle. With increased global mobility, the demographics of societies are changing (Dimmock, Shah & Stevenson, 2004), creating communities of "racial, ethnic, cultural and language diversity" (Banks, 2004, p. 296). The consequence of these changes is reflected at the national and local level but also within the micro-community context of the school. Chalmers, Bogitini and Renshaw suggest that local communities need to develop resourcefulness to meet "change and transformation" (1999, p. 2). This paper examines issues related to the impact of increasing ethnic diversity on the identity of secondary schools in New Zealand.

Firstly, I outline the changing character of communities in Aoteora/New Zealand and the resultant change to school populations. The policy context for education in the nation will be described and some of the findings from the New Zealand component of a tri-nation exploratory study are presented. Having been aware of the increasing ethnic diversity within a nation where national policy initiatives are constructed and implemented within a constitution based on a commitment to biculturalism (Sibley & Liu, 2004), I initiated a research study to examine how school principals manage issues that are arising from increasing ethnic diversity. This study examined school leadership within ethnically diverse schools and permitted an international comparison of "new ways of thinking and working" (Blair, 2002, p.184) by school principals. Whilst the focus of the study was to examine varied forms of leadership, the findings offer insight into diverse approaches to creating inclusive school identities. In particular, the project provides empirical data on strategies that have been contextually developed to address issues of both identity and social inclusion. Finally I offer opportunities for further research in this field.

Changing Communities

As with many other western societies, New Zealand is experiencing increasing immigration. People search for new jobs, greater opportunities, and cheaper residential areas while others, including refugees, seek out safety from political upheaval, social alienation and marginalisation in their own countries. New Zealand has an immigration policy (Legislation New Zealand, 2004) which is re-evaluated annually to recognise changing situations worldwide. As a country with clean air, open spaces, and an acknowledged way of life that supports sustainability, an English-speaking language and values that encompass a sustainable 'green' approach to resource use (Ministry of Economic Development, 2007),

New Zealand as a small country with just over 4 million residents (Statistics New Zealand, 2006) is a popular destination, especially for those from Britain, Asia and the Middle East.

The latest census reflects the growing demographic diversity that increased immigration has caused. Although Maori are indigenous to New Zealand, the nation has traditionally had a higher European population with Maori and Pacific Island ethnicities forming the remainder of the total. Currently, those residents of European ethnicity are declining (now 68%), and those identifying as Maori and or Pacific Peoples are on the rise (Statistics New Zealand, 2006). In recent years more immigrants have arrived from Asia, such that the numbers of people of Asian ethnicity have more than doubled since 1996 and increased by almost 50% since the 2001 census. In the 2006 census a new category (MELAA) was introduced to allow for those who identified as being Middle Eastern, Latin American or African.

Trends that show increasing migration indicate communities of change. Communities will change their physical shape and form but will also experience change from within. As differing groups settle and become residents in selected areas, their immediate community identity will alter. Whilst I am aware of much controversy concerning the meanings applied to the term 'community', one provided by Arbor reflects perceptions of such an entity as "a group of people living together in one locality, having common interests, goals, and customs, and having a system of values that is shared and commonly understood among its members" (1998, p. 57). Such a community can be viewed as supplying a vehicle for emotional needs such as fraternity, identity, and sociability (Cater & Jones 1989; Strike 1999; Taylor, Watts, & Johnston 1995). However, in current times it may be more plausible to view a community as being "of and for difference" (Chalmers et al., 1999, p. 2). Increasing ethnic diversity reduces the homogeneity of communities and provides more challenges for connectedness and a common sense of identity.

School leaders work within communities and the diversity of community context inevitably impacts on the concept and process of leadership. Their own school's student and staff population form another community which in turn needs cohesion and its own sense of identity. School principals therefore work to develop school environments that acknowledge and share the values and beliefs of their local community. Creating a 'sense of identity' has aroused much debate in the literature (see for example Piper & Garratt, 2004) and within a school community the personal development of students cannot be seen as an 'extra' (Wardekker & Miedema, 2001), so the way in which group identity is constructed is important. In New Zealand it is anticipated that principals will promote a school culture that supports respect for all students and their families and the wider community, through such processes as student engagement, well-being and inclusion (Ministry of Education, 2005).

As a school's ethnic profile changes, so the principal faces new predicaments within the extremely complex set of relationships that exist in each school. He (or she) is forced to find ways of reconciling the issues with which he is constantly faced, with the perceived and obvious needs and wishes of the school and the extended social community (Billot, 2007). In effect, they are forced to "deal with the particular conglomeration of cultural circumstances in which they are located at any given time" (Gronn and Ribbins 2003, p. 92). As New Zealand receives additional immigrants into the country there is increased inter-marriage. In the last census over 10% of the population identified with more than one ethnic group (Statistics New Zealand, 2006). Thus New Zealand society is transforming to become increasingly diverse. For example, the population statistics for Auckland indicate an accentuated trend, with 1 in 2 of those usually resident in the Auckland Region being European, 1 in 5 being of Asian ethnicity, 1 in 7 being Pacific Peoples, 1 in 9 being Maori and 1 in 50 identifying as MELAA (Statistics New Zealand, 2006). At the same time local dynamics will continue to provide an ever-changing social environment.

While the changing demographics impact upon economic and social community conditions, those working in the education sector move to address the changing needs of the different school student bodies. In 1998 New Zealand introduced a radical change for the country (Wylie, 1994), by introducing a model of self-management within the policy of *Tomorrow's Schools*. The reform emphasised the managerial functions of the principal who now acts as the professional leader of the institution (Minister of Education, 1988) while keeping a strong focus on the relationship between the school and the local community. The principal is seen as having major responsibility for decision-making (Harold, Hawksworth, Mansell & Thrupp, 2001). Each principal then needs to be responsive yet proactive and visionary while also focused, accountable and able to communicate with diverse personalities. In this national context of increasing ethnic diversity and sectoral responsibilities, New Zealand principals face the challenge of enhancing their school culture so that students and staff alike can identify with and feel an integral part of the school community.

Researching Ethnic Diversity in Schools

A research study to examine how school principals manage ethnic diversity was initiated in three nations, New Zealand, Australia and Canada. While only aspects of the New Zealand component will be presented here, a paper reporting the full results of this project can be accessed in another journal (see Billot, Goddard & Cranston, 2007), The source of the data for the project was the principals themselves, as he/she holds the ultimate accountability for the school (Billot, et al., 2007). The study size was small (fifteen schools across the three city locations were selected on the basis of their ethnic profiles), so the findings can only be viewed as preliminary to further study. They do, however, identify relevant and salient issues facing the school principals and the manner in which these can be addressed. The principals within the sample were very enthusiastic to participate in the study and willingly gave their stories in the semi-structured in-depth interviews. The convergent interviewing model that was used (Dick, 1990) allowed revision and refinement with each interview (Billot et al., 2007). The interview narratives provide insight into the way in which the individual principals have chosen to develop particular identities for their schools. Excerpts from the New Zealand interviews will be provided here; pseudonyms are used when citing individual participants.

As this research study was undertaken in New Zealand, it is important to acknowledge the country's history and the impact of its bicultural partnership on policy developments (Sibley & Liu, 2004). The Treaty of Waitangi (signed in 1840 between Maori representatives and the British Crown) is the founding document of New Zealand and underpins the nation's constitution (Sibley & Liu, 2004). Policies enacted are developed within a commitment to biculturalism. This political context frames a challenge for acknowledging other ethnicities, for they may require imperatives that do not always sit well with the bicultural emphasis (Billot, 2008).

The sample schools had all experienced great change to their student profile over the last five to ten years. In one school there were over 80 identified ethnic groups and, in another, students attended the school, coming from far suburbs, *because* of the ethnic diversity. Firstly, while the principals identified varied forms of diversity, including socio-economic, academic ability, learning styles and physical disability, there was agreement that ethnic diversity was the most challenging. How the principals developed a school identity to reflect the student profile indicates a need for contextual awareness.

Trying to create stable and inclusive social and learning environments required many types of strategies and initiatives, each of which needed to be constantly re-evaluated. The way in which the principals addressed each need was a reflection not only of their particular school context but also their own individualized style. Some worked more collaboratively while others preferred to retain control and use delegation strategies. George prefers to work collaboratively: "*I don't have meetings for meetings sake. I mean, if there's an issue the door's always open and people will come and talk it through and if need be I'll bring in other people and we'll facilitate the strategy and then we'll deliver it.*" Michael builds his style upon his philosophical beliefs: "*I hope that I am fairly convinced that there are some things that I would not do and some things that I feel are important and I think need to be done and it's about justice, it's about listening, being democratic.*"

I visited each school and observed practices and contextual differences and noted that while aiming to create a cohesive and close-knit community, each principal developed personalized relationships with staff and students. This was achieved in various ways. George said that:

> *A lot of my style is different and a lot of it is me. To me, in terms of ethics, it is about being accessible, being fair, being consistent and not having an agenda and being a good listener. Those are the things, and (also) being a peoples' person. A lot of what I do is about trying to relate to people and trying to understand where they're coming from and trying to also be proactive.*

Michael consciously evaluates his role:

> *I am really conscious of my behaviour. Both in the school, in my relationships with staff, in my relationships with students I'm really conscious of the role I am playing, that I've got to act in an ethical honest way and that if I don't, then how can I expect others to. And I am really aware of the power, the symbolic power that I have. So when I go out onto the grounds and I'm talking to the students and I'm picking up the litter off the ground, I know this is a silly example but it's actually it's a powerful symbol about ethics in a way. I'm going to walk the talk.*

The most noticeable feature of the principals' stories was the confidence with which they developed and facilitated their own forms of school leadership. As every school is different, the principals worked with their own philosophies and experience to determine their form of leadership. From the interview data it was possible to identify these differing philosophies. Murray felt that within the school community "*there has to be coherence and there has to be a strong ethos that binds it together and it can happen, differ-*

ent kinds of glue that do that." In a similar vein George mentioned that his school contains *"a very collective collaborative leadership and so much of my leadership around the place is very symbolic. People sense that that I am sort of part of what they do."*

These perspectives provide a background for discussion on the ways in which principals build cohesive school communities. Their modes of leadership might differ, but there is significant similarity between their objectives to achieve stable learning and social environments.

School Strategies for Inclusion

Goddard and Hart have recently asserted that "the leadership role of the principal in a multicultural society requires strategies of inclusion to create a culture of equitable access for all children" (2007, p. 16). Inclusion conceptually exists upon a continuum which extends from strategies that are partial and disconnected to those which embrace a fuller expectation *"to make sure every single group in the school is enmeshed in the culture and made to feel part of things."* (Murray). There can be a tension between efforts to ensure inclusion of all, and initiatives that could appear as stand-alone activities that highlight rather than celebrate difference. Strategies that are developed to encourage inclusivity need consistency and strong alignment with the school philosophy.

The principals described a range of practices that sought inclusion, including events, such as an annual cultural week in which dance, food and performance are celebrated, and regular 'costume' days. Although some activities are common to all schools in the study (such as displaying flags from every nation represented in the school), each school has developed its own approach to creating a community that integrates its diverse student body. Murray said *"I am always thinking about ... what are the neat things we can do to build the community, rather than thinking in terms of problems of groups. We celebrate difference but work as a family."* This has resonance with Piper and Garratt who believe that "celebration ensures that particular differences continue to matter" (2004, p. 278). Diana bases her school leadership upon an ethic of inclusion by rejecting tolerance of others and emphasizing the connectedness between students. She vehemently asserted that *"the word 'tolerance' really irritates me because there's something not equal about tolerance. I like to use the word celebrate."*

As certain episodic initiatives to be inclusive may accentuate difference and the 'other', it is important that such events are enmeshed into the organisational fabric and culture of the school. In particular, as Robertson and Miller noted in their recent study in New Zealand, schools that engender an "inclusive philosophy of community" contribute in a number of ways to a "more culturally inclusive society" (2007, p. 101). Efforts at inclusion can run the risk of being used to seal the edges around the tensions of difference. Piper and Garratt believe that it is the "relationship between differences rather than the differences themselves, which provides a basis for a more ethical style of teaching" (2004, p. 288). If diversity is valued rather than tolerated, or difference assimilated into the majority group, authenticity can be fostered in students so that they are true to their inner values.

While it was not possible to measure the level of inclusion or even the success of inclusion strategies in the sample schools, it was evident from the interview narratives that social justice was integral to the leadership practices. This justice was perceived as resulting from an ethic of fairness for all school pupils and staff. It was apparent that the objective was to ensure that while all school members were confident with their own home culture, they also felt comfortable in the mainstream culture. Whilst several authors have recently called for further research into social justice (see for example Dimmock, 2005; Furman & Gruenewald, 2004; Shields, 2002), Lund (1998) provides a pedagogical view on fostering justice and equity. He maintains that by using a morally responsible approach, practices can be developed that validate the cultural histories of all students. The principals in this study exhibited expectations for the development of such practices in their schools.

Implications

Migration is causing changed communities and ethnicity is but one element of the differences between people in those communities. Ethnic differences can be overtly apparent, but ways of acknowledging such cultural difference are not easily achieved. Trying to create harmony and cohesion within groups of people involves not only finding common bonds between them but also fostering a sense of identity and social connection. Leeman has suggested that in order to provide greater effectiveness of practices in schools, principals need to integrate practices into school policy by working with a "focused development of vision" and include "the perspectives of all students regarding school culture" (2003, p. 31). This study has provided a glimpse into ways in which New Zealand school leaders attempt to develop a cohesive school community, often by encouraging a collective school identity.

Wardekker and Miedema claim that identity comprises a stable way in which individuals relate to themselves and others, but believe that it is more

of a "continuous activity of construction and deconstruction of developing, maintaining and evaluating personal commitments to values, persons and practices" (2001, p. 37). Efforts to assist *assimilation and integration* of immigrants, the *acculturation* of *other* ethnic groups and the aim to bring *other* ethnicities into a fuller appreciation of the customs and mores of the host group are all examples of well meaning intentions. De Abreu and Elbers (2005) challenge the use of these actions and emphasise the need to include practices that involve all students equally and do not cause those in minority groups to remain on the perimeter. They also believe that "there is a close connection between the use of cultural tools and processes of identity and identity development" (De Abreu & Elbers, 2005, p. 8). The principals in this study have provided some examples of how the facilitation of an ethic of inclusion that works with a holistic school identity may bridge these constructs. These intentions are, however, based on the premise that the dominant group will determine the characteristics of the shared culture (Billot, 2007).

School identity consists of relational linkages situated in a particular location, for identification with a physical place can result from the "desire for fixity and for security of identity in the middle of all the movement and change" (Massey, 1991, p. 26). Such is the significance of how students view their school; it can provide a locus for knowing and acknowledging one's physical and psychological place. The challenge is for school principals to develop a school identity that relies heavily on linking both individual and group identity, so that the school becomes a "site of multiple but co-existing identities" (Pawson, 1996, p. 347). As the human identity is constructed through the development of the psyche and manipulated by the mores and values of the social environment, the school identity can be seen as resulting from the organization of values as transmitted through the social structure. The interweaving of cultural mores and expectations can support the members of the school community to work collaboratively and with a shared purpose.

Conclusion

The role of principals is crucial to the development of a school identity which embraces the membership of all students and staff, whatever their ethnicity. The creation of such a community provides a significant challenge for the principal as leader. Not only does the school environment need to offer a supportive and welcoming context, but the school identity needs to reflect a place where students and staff alike are represented and acknowledged. Every individual should be able to make the transition between their own personal cultural background and that of the school. This melding of multiple identities into an educational community allows everyone to feel comfortable with one's own sense of self, as well as being an integral part of the school.

The external perception of the school's identity needs to be aligned with the way in which the students experience their school's culture. This connection eases the movement between home and school and provides a strong alliance between school and the wider community. As parents and students in minority groups often have to decipher differing school practices so that they make cultural sense, there can be tension between school strategies and the engagement of families outside of the dominant culture (De Abreu & Elbers, 2005). While principals may focus on enhancing an inclusive environment, assumptions that inclusion strategies are effective can mean that some students are unintentionally excluded or isolated. Practices that do not sit well within the culture of the school may be viewed as stand-alone strategies and not reflective of a fully inclusive approach to multi-ethnicity. Aiming to facilitate equality of opportunity and social justice may disguise the tendency for assimilation rather than inclusion. So, while deliberate practices can draw together diverse groups to achieve social inclusion, tension may exist when the focus is not fully multi-dimensional.

The principal cannot work alone in engendering a school identity that is inclusive of all. There needs to be congruence between the school's structure and practices, its organisational culture and "interpersonal factors that allow it to accept and embrace diversity and multiplicity" (Holzinger & Dhalla, 2007, p. 48). As Goddard and Hart have recently claimed, since the construction of the education system tends to follow the 'dominant cultural and linguistic class', so it is "only good practice, both pedagogically and ethically" (2007, p. 18) for procedures and policies to acknowledge ethnic diversity and difference.

We need to ensure that we maintain a watchful eye on what is really going on in ethnically heterogeneous schools and keep issues of ethnocultural diversity firmly on the agenda (Leeman, 2003). Even if social changes can disrupt a sense of knowing one's place, there is still scope for engendering one's sense of identity within the school community. De Abreu and Elbers (2005) believe that the "emergence of a multicultural society asks for creativity and the development of new concepts, values and practices" (p. 9). Perhaps we should look further than trying to identify commonalities and spend more time and effort on finding ways to *be* different and integrate difference into our social identity?

This paper has referred to some of the findings of an exploratory study of leadership strategies in New Zealand multi-ethnic schools and offers future pos-

sibilities for examining how students can identify with, and feel part of, their own school community.

This study focused on the principals' viewpoints. The student voice is yet to be heard.

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