

# Examining Racism in Australian Classrooms Through Philosophical Inquiry

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**R**ecent Australian Education policies (Ministry Advisory Council, 1996) are reflecting the seriousness with which multiculturalism is being viewed. The meaning of multiculturalism is still being debated, and how to incorporate it into the fabric of Australian society, whilst allowing for everyone's viewpoint to be respected and catered for, is still problematic.

The concepts of cultural diversity, coupled with tolerance and understanding, or at least acceptance, are viewed by those in charge of policy making in education as the ideals that teachers in Australia should be endeavouring to instil in students today. These are laudable principles and many teachers would probably applaud them, but the question on teachers' lips would most likely be, how do we implement a subject that is complex, emotive and at times, in the view of some, divisive, without causing further conflict or merely treating it in a superficial manner? Some have already voiced concern about handling multiculturalism effectively, in a manner which avoids tokenism.

These are valid questions which must be answered to the satisfaction of all teachers who are expected to make the necessary changes in their teaching practice to comply with government policies and the expectations of a culturally diverse society. I wish to discuss here some of the concerns raised by teachers in several studies, here and in the U.S.A., on the issue of incorporating a multicultural emphasis in their teaching and handling racism in the classroom, for two reasons. Firstly, to highlight some of the concerns expressed about dealing with multiculturalism directly in the classroom. Secondly, to discuss how the use of a philosophical exploration of issues, used in the Community of Inquiry approach, can be effective in incorporating multiculturalism and related issues in the classroom, in a culturally sensitive and respectful manner, whilst working within the existing curriculum.

## SOCIAL CHANGE REQUIRES INDIVIDUAL CHANGE

The incorporation of multiculturalism in a society requires a tolerance of difference and a pluralistic view of culture. For these attributes to be part of a society's psyche there must first exist empathy and a willingness to examine one's own perspectives in the light of alternate perspectives. It also requires a degree of

comfort in handling change and diversity, so as to incorporate new perspectives into one's framework of existence with the least amount of conflict.

If Australia wishes to broaden its horizons in tourism, trade and industry, the attributes mentioned above will be a necessary component for facilitating a successful affiliation with our neighbours and other countries further a field, not to mention the creation of a society able to cater to the needs of all its citizens.

Teachers are in a unique position to foster and facilitate those personal characteristics necessary to accept change open-mindedly and with a willingness to incorporate the aspirations of all for the well-being of all. This sort of attitude to life is one which must evolve. It requires a particular approach to life and learning which can be fostered in a Community of Inquiry; a sincere and courageous quest for truth and meaning in all facets of one's learning. A pluralistic view of life can only be gained through a desire to understand and respect the experiences of others, and this can only be achieved effectively when it is incorporated automatically into one's reflections about life.

#### A GLIMPSE THROUGH OTHERS' EYES

I view racism as a social toxin, the origin of which can only be found by delving deeply into the social unconscious. Differences of opinion on the complex issues of spirituality, law, morality and customs will always exist between varying cultures. I therefore do not present the Community of Inquiry method as a means by which to overcome all these barriers. I do, however, believe in the power inherent in this approach to remove some of the barriers and render those that remain more transparent, thus providing a glimpse into the thoughts and feelings of those who live on the other side. A Community of Inquiry may not necessarily be an antidote to the toxin but it could help pave the way for an increase in tolerance and, I would personally hope, an enrichment of our lives, gained through an ever-widening range of possibilities from which to choose when determining our beliefs, codes of behaviour, and our direction.

#### LEGITIMATE CONCERNS ABOUT DISCUSSING RACISM IN THE CLASSROOM

Canadians Patrick Solomon and Cynthia Levine-Rasky examined the attitude of teachers towards handling issues such as racism in their classrooms. One concern raised was the belief that handling racism in the classroom would either «...stir up the pot...» and «... increase resentment in racists.» or «... lead to the development of attitudes and behaviours that perpetuate racism.». Some teachers advised that racism «... should not be introduced into their consciousness.» (Solomon & Levine-Rasky, p.29, 1996)

Although these are legitimate concerns the latter statement is rather naive because, try as one may to prevent it, many children will be exposed to racism in some way, whether it be directed at them or merely something they witness. I agree that merely bringing up the topic of racism itself in the

classroom may not be the most effective approach. Some of the underlying causes of racism - intolerance, ignorance, fear and a myopic view of the world - are the roots of other forms of tension in society, in areas that have nothing to do with race. By handling these issues in the classroom, devoid of labels such as racism, there is the possibility to go beyond issues dealing merely with race.

In a Community of Inquiry there will be many differing opinions regarding race and allied issues, and whether or not different races are able to live harmoniously. Indeed the contribution of participants from different racial backgrounds will rarely, if ever, be totally in agreement. However, the Community of Inquiry is designed to foster attitudes and behaviours which can aid people in dealing with their own opinions and feelings and those of others. It provides a space in which it is safe to explore ideas that may seem strange or unfamiliar, but in a structure that requires sound reasoning to be the foundation of the opinions expressed.

Sound reasoning is arrived at through an open-minded comparison of ideas and a deliberation among alternatives. The word 'reason' comes from the word 'ratio', which means 'balance'. This balance can only be achieved through the examination of issues from varying perspectives, both sides of the scale, so to speak. Issues pertinent to the topic of racism, such as fairness, respect, belonging, identity, freedom, difference, alienation and tolerance, as well as inconsistencies between the rights experienced by oneself and other parties, and the rights each party views as entitlements, can be examined; each person, thereby, gaining a view of themselves from both their own perspective and those of others.

These issues are relevant to many other areas of life apart from racism and by discussing these issues in various contexts a deeper understanding of their significance to our lives, individually and collectively, can be gained, informing our outlook on life and our decision making. From this wider perspective children can make valuable judgements about their own viewpoint and learn to monitor their thoughts and feelings.

Another concern raised in the Canadian study of multiculturalism was the perception of an over-emphasis on the cultures of immigrants, seen as a devaluing of the host country's culture. However because an effective Community of Inquiry values the opinions of all participants and the subject matter and direction of the discussion is determined by the participants, rather than the teacher, matters relating to all cultures within that particular group can be voiced. The value of the Community of Inquiry is in the way it caters directly to the needs of the participants, because they voice their concerns and endeavour to address them through their inquiry.

#### CONCERN FOR CURRICULAR OVERLOAD

Concern for 'curricular overload' was also raised in the Canadian study. This could also be a concern in Australia as the CSF is a very comprehensive curriculum and some teachers have expressed difficulty in covering all that is required of them. However, the CSF states that «...the aspirations and experiences of all students from ... all ethnic ... and cultural backgrounds...» (Victorian Board of Studies,

p.5, 1995) must be taken into consideration in the teaching of the curriculum. But how? Can teachers know their students well enough to enable them to consider all of their experiences and aspirations? Because we can't possibly know all of the needs of our students we need to give them the opportunity to direct their learning in a way that enables them to work towards fulfilling their needs, individually and collectively.

Lipman, as discussed by Cam, describes philosophy as being at «... right angles to the other disciplines, so that together like warp and woof, they interpenetrate and interweave until they produce a seamless texture.» (Cam, p.19, 1994) Without the warp to support the woof, and vice versa, there would be no fabric, neither could stand alone. I believe that one needs a sound philosophy to support the beliefs we form through the knowledge we acquire, and to justify our actions.

### INCORPORATING PHILOSOPHY INTO EXISTING CURRICULUM

Philosophical inquiry can be incorporated throughout the curriculum, as an integral part of the process of gaining understanding. A means by which students are given the opportunity to examine and reflect upon the knowledge they acquire at school and the significance and implications of that knowledge in their lives. Cultural differences would arise in many areas of study, especially in a country which has a variety of nationalities among its citizens. Philosophical inquiry could be an effective way to incorporate the variety of cultural viewpoints among students, as an integral part of investigating the relevant topic of study. Issues pertinent to race would arise naturally and could be dealt with in a logical and open-minded manner, avoiding the complications that a specific «race debate» may engender.

A Melbourne study by Wilks and Cherednichenko on the effectiveness of using a Community of Inquiry approach in the teaching of Asian Studies, found a positive attitude among most of the teachers who took part. The majority of the participants in the study were in favour of the approach because:

«... it went beyond the vicarious experience of the culture, ... to challenge their own assumptions and understanding and enable them to make connections between the practices of their own culture and that of people from another culture.» (Wilks & Cherednichenko, 1996)

The conclusion of the study indicated that, in most cases, teachers perceived an improvement in both lesson structure and learning outcomes as a result of using a Community of Inquiry approach. Teachers did, however, express a perceived lack of knowledge as to how to implement this approach in their teaching.

## DELVING BELOW THE SURFACE

**A study of Culture**

In a Community of Inquiry concerning 'culture' the aim should be to delve beyond general comprehension questions about cultural idiosyncrasies and/or differences between cultures, to a discussion of such questions as;

- How is culture defined?
- Who defines it?
- Do people define it differently and why?
- Can cultures mix without a dilution or compromise of either culture? What would be the consequences of this?
- Is culture something one is born into, something one acquires or both?
- Is culture a matter of choice or something imposed upon one?
- Is culture static or dynamic?

It is by revealing underlying assumptions and examining these, that a greater understanding of oneself and others can be attained. It is also, from a learning theory point of view, a more thorough approach. Dr. Bernice McCarthy (1981) discusses in her approach to learning, which she calls the 4 Mat System, the importance of ensuring that the Why, What, How and What can I make of this aspects are included in the learning experience. A Community of Inquiry fulfills these learning requirements and an application of this system to the study of 'culture' would enable one to search beyond what are the explicit attributes of culture, to discuss:

- Why those attributes are there.
- What is their purpose?
- How do they shape people's lives and how can we understand these in relation to our own culture?
- And what can I make of this new perspective I have gained on this issue?

In Lowden's (p.4, 1988) discussion of the Myers Briggs approach to learning, he advises teachers to include the following in learning experiences, in order to cater to the needs of all students;

- Say it.
- Make it visible.
- Describe the action that could result from your idea.
- Link it to other ideas, other fields, and if you can, to the universe and eternity.

These guidelines fit the description of an effective Community of Inquiry. The first step, Say it, is taken when an issue is raised for discussion. The visibility component is the perceptions of the inquirers, the way they view an issue. A description of the action that may result, could refer to the discussion of the implications of one's beliefs and the application of logic to expose any inconsistencies in one's reasoning. When one ponders the implications of one's philosophical standpoint, one needs to examine whether or not the beliefs being expressed would result in action that is consistent with one's moral/ethical viewpoint. The linking could be a further examination of one's standpoint through the universal application of it, to determine the implications of the viewpoint in diverse contexts, thereby gaining further insight into the feasibility and soundness of one's philosophy.

Philosophical inquiry should serve as a means by which the knowledge learnt at school is sifted, analysed, discussed and, through a deeper understanding of its significance and implications, put to effective use by students.

The students of today will be the policy makers of tomorrow. The society in which they live will have to cope with the rapid changes which are occurring as Australia endeavours to find its place in a region which is predominately non-Anglo-Celtic.

The recent media attention given to issues related to the present ethnic mix in Australia, should be cause for concern to anyone who believes in the democratic principles and «fair go» attitude which is such a celebrated aspect of our culture.

The use of philosophical investigation, inherent in the Community of Inquiry approach, provides an opportunity for students to experiment with possibilities on a theoretical level, before they actually experience them in society. The skills fostered in a Community of Inquiry will better equip students to make the decisions, when they are of voting age, which will determine the policies that affect the future of our society.

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