C H A P T E R  S E V E N

Cultural Pluralism and Education Policy

INTRODUCTION

This chapter seeks to examine the phenomenon of cultural pluralism and its implications for education policy. The issues are extraordinarily complex and the conclusions drawn here are necessarily very tentative. The issues are, however, very topical not only in New Zealand but in virtually all OECD countries.

The procedure adopted in this chapter is to consider the phenomenon of cultural and linguistic diversity in other OECD countries and to draw some preliminary conclusions from their experience. Hopefully some useful lessons will emerge for New Zealand policy makers. Only passing reference is made in this chapter to the New Zealand situation. The specific issue of Maori education is considered separately in Chapter 8. Some conclusions that can be signalled at the outset are that all OECD countries with cultural and linguistic minorities face rather similar dilemmas, that the analysis of the issues is, at best, incomplete and that there are no neat solutions as regards the appropriate educational policy response. This is comforting to those who find New Zealand's own dilemmas particularly daunting. It also suggests caution before embarking on any new educational enterprise that is held out to be a panacea. The OECD reports that the present situation regarding multicultural educational programmes is 'by and large disappointing from every point of view . . .'. It needs, of course, also to be
recognised that New Zealand's cultural and linguistic situation has unique features (notably the Treaty of Waitangi and the consequences thereof), and that lessons learnt elsewhere will not necessarily 'fit' New Zealand.

'Multicultural education' is an omnibus term usually seen as embracing one or both of the themes of cultural diversity and language. On the question of diversity, a key issue is that of national cohesion. It will in fact be a substantial aim of any educational system to promote social unity—indeed this is likely to be far more important than the promotion of change. The state is concerned to ensure that basic social skills are taught and that the constitutional order is thereby preserved. The state system will be concerned to cultivate 'those cognitive, affective and social skills which a society values'. The system will do this through the stated curriculum and also through the 'hidden curriculum which may convey the concepts of planning, persistence and problem-solving, notions of power and authority, or patterns of social differentiation'. When we consider cultural diversity against the requirement of overall cohesiveness, we are confronted by what Bullivant refers to as the 'pluralist dilemma'. This is the problem of 'reconciling the heterogeneous demands and needs of the minority groups in a society with its paramount need to provide for the collective good of a homogeneous social and political system.'

Language is the other main theme in multicultural education. In other OECD countries it has long assumed a considerable political as well as educational significance. As an educational issue 'it is entirely understandable that in educational circles the multicultural issue has become centred around language, since schools in their modern form have become, among other things, institutions which effectively standardise and unify language. The school has always been the shrine of language, so to speak. In endeavouring to inculcate linguistic standards and respect for them, the school has been performing a cultural and a social function: it has engaged itself in the work of linguistic unification demanded by economic development in modern societies, and it has administered criteria of excellence that serve to enforce social selection and classify the merits and skills of the pupils.'

The multicultural education response to the pluralist dilemma has, by and large, been designed to meet one or more of the following objectives:

- to preserve minority cultures as valuable per se;
- to enhance inter-cultural harmony;
- to improve the educational outcomes of minority groups by enhancing their self-esteem through the provision of a supportive cultural environment.

The outcomes, as already noted, have generally been disappointing. One aim of this chapter will be to consider why this is, and what alternative policy responses might be considered. One problem that confronts any attempt to
analyse failure of past and present multicultural programmes is that discussion tends to proceed without the benefit of a philosophical framework which would separately identify educational, cultural and economic factors. According to an OECD report ‘Analysis almost inevitably drifts into folklore and moralising.’ In the absence of a suitable framework, the development of multicultural education tends to be ‘affected far more by the laws governing education systems than by cultural, social and economic factors outside education.’

The Multicultural Background

The existence of minority groups and the migration of cultural groups is, of course, not new. In one sense, therefore, the existence of minority cultural groups is not the problem. Rather, two inter-related developments in the modern era have led to current difficulties.

The first development is the extraordinary growth of a global, technology based, culture. This modern culture demands certain forms of social and economic organisation which conflicts with those of minority cultures. Minority cultures can be thus seen as vestiges of previous forms of economic and social organisation. As Verne has observed, the resurgence of ethnic culture (for example of Maoridom in New Zealand) can be seen as a contradictory movement to the uniformity-promoting trend of modernity. As the OECD report points out, minority cultures stand out against this trend of uniformity in two ways. Firstly, as against the conformity of modernity, they provide a range of incentives and interests essential to dynamic progress. But, secondly, they can also be seen as backward looking cultures in relation to modern trends, in that they cause underdevelopment and their preservation heightens the inequalities among countries and social groups and ‘accentuates the domination of those groups that have scientific and technological culture at their finger tips.’ It should, of course, be stressed that the judgement of under-development is always relative to a particular theory of the proper course for a society or a group to take. Much of the multicultural debate has, in fact, to do with the values that should govern development.

The second development is the growth of highly centrist forms of organisation in the modern industrial state. This centrist development is related to technological development in that the dominance of technique imposes homogeneity upon the economy. The ever increasing interdependence of society leaves less and less room for alternative forms of organisation. In this sense minority cultures becomes ‘a problem’. Further, more and more responsibility for society, including social responsibility, is taken on by central administration and less and less by families,
churches, tribes and other forms of local organisation. It is 'as though society had lost all self-regulatory capacity and now needed to live under constant supervision from the political authority.' In this, inter-ethnic relations are no different. As Verne points out, the novel feature in this regard is not so much that governments are concerned with these problems, but that ethnic communities themselves look for official intervention as if no other solution to problems of inter-ethnic relations existed.

We should note at this stage that the dimensions of ethnicity are not necessarily those of culture. As Barth has stressed, ethnicity has a dual nature. Ethnic groups are defined by both their objective cultural forms of behaviour (especially linguistic behaviour) and by their subjective views of themselves and each other. This observation is an important corrective to the simplistic 'ethnic group = cultural group' equation. It also points to the importance of the relationship between ethnic groups sharing the same geographical territory.

Bullivant, citing several other authors, extends this concept of inter-ethnic group relationship. First, we can refer to the minority ethnic groups and to the majority ethnic group. We can think of the latter group, Bullivant suggests, as 'the Staatsvolk, that is, "the people of the state", a term that is not inappropriate despite connotations that some might find disturbing'. Second, analytically these relationships have a vertical component and a horizontal component depending on whether one is referring to the state or the nation. Quoting Enloe, Bullivant points out that:

The state is a vertical structure of public authority. It contrasts with the nation, which is essentially a horizontal network of trust and identity. The state's most visible expressions are those institutions which exert vertical authority; the civic bureaucracy, the judicial system and the military and police.

Bullivant suggests that the interaction of members of ethnic groups with the state (that is, the vertical systems and structures) entails 'them belonging to statuses and social categories that have very little to do with ethnicity. The state (the vertical domain) should be an integrated and homogeneous system. At the horizontal level (the nation) there is room for some diversity of sentiments and values—in other words polyethnic diversity can prevail, especially in the private domain of family, neighbourhood, local association and community.'

Writing of the Australian situation, Bullivant argues that the term 'multicultural' as descriptive and prescriptive has shortcomings and should be abandoned. He considers that 'polyethnic' goes a long way to conceptualising the composition of Australia. He quotes John Higham in support of conceptualising Australia descriptively as having an 'integrated polyethnic form of pluralism'.

In contrast to the integrationist model, it will not eliminate ethnic boundaries. But neither will it maintain them intact. It will uphold the validity of a common
culture, to which all individuals have access, while sustaining the efforts of minorities to preserve and enhance their own integrity. In principle this dual commitment can be met by distinguishing between boundaries and nucleus. No ethnic group under these terms may have the support of the general community in strengthening its boundaries. All boundaries are understood to be permeable. Ethnic nuclei, on the other hand, are respected as enduring centers of social action.

This conceptual approach fits with the vertical and horizontal divisions of society discussed earlier. The public domain and vertical state component are necessarily integrated to maintain the “civism” required for a viable state to prosper politically and economically. The private domain and horizontal nation component is polyethnic, allowing for considerable ethno-cultural diversity of lifestyles, sentiments and values. Prescriptively, nothing more should be aimed at if inter-ethnic harmony and political and economic stability are to be achieved.

Multicultural Education

Education systems are not culturally neutral. The ‘store of knowledge which forms the subjects taught is based on a set of criteria that are culturally highly connotative.” Also, as noted earlier, teaching practices and other forms of school organisation form the ‘hidden curriculum’ which conveys concepts and notions about the ordering of society. Thus, through both the formal and ‘hidden’ curricula, the school reflects the cultural values which shape the forms of socialisation in society. The state school has its own perception of multicultural action which invariably reflects that of the dominant group in society.

Until quite recent times, education systems responded to the phenomenon of cultural diversity with the principle of uniformity. The aim was twofold. Firstly, uniformity was seen as necessary for justice and equity. By treating all in the same way, by instilling the same values, by using the same language and curriculum, it was expected that members of all groups would have an equal opportunity of economic and social success. But uniformity was also seen as essential to national consensus—hence the assimilationist policies that were explicitly applied in most OECD countries until the 1960s. ‘Schools were seen as a melting pot where differences should have and could have been eliminated.”

Craft notes that, as in other areas of social policy, education policy change ‘almost invariably follows social change and rarely precedes it.” With ethnic resurgence in many countries, views on cultural diversity and its implications for education policy have changed. The concerns are still for national consensus and social justice but these are now seen as demanding the recognition of cultural differences within the state education system. As regards national unity, the potential danger of not respecting the cultures of minority groups tends now to be
seen as rather greater than the danger of not seeking to assimilate them. Similarly, as regards social justice, the recent tendency has been to see multicultural education as a way to improve, rather than decrease, the life chances of members of minority groups.

As indicated already the experience of multicultural educational programmes has been disappointing. We should note at first that, like many other terms in the cultural pluralism debate, the term ‘multicultural education’ is ambiguous. The 1986 OECD report suggests the term contains two opposing approaches. One approach is formal and regards multicultural education as a new teaching discipline to be slotted into the school timetable like maths or civics. The second approach is informal and regards multicultural education as a state of mind that permeates the whole curriculum. In this second approach, it ends up as plain education—learning tolerance, and social and civic education. The New Zealand Curriculum Review proposes both elements: it contains recommendations for including taha Maori and for eliminating racism and sexism.

Bullivant notes that the literature indicates that a great deal of multicultural education takes the formal approach, that is, the stress is on specific cultural aspects such as heritage and history, language, literature, foods and customs. He cites the example of New Zealand primary schools where Maori studies concentrate on the aesthetic aspects of Maoridom: Maori myths, ceremonies and customs, some language and songs. While pointing out that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with such approaches, as long as it is recognised that it is a simplistic and one-sided view of cultures, he suggests four limitations. First, it emphasises the expressive rather than instrumental aspect of the cultural programme. Secondly, it emphasises historical lifestyles of ethno-cultural groups but has nothing to say about current strategies for adapting to present circumstances and gaining rewarding life-chances. Thirdly, the stress on historically dated knowledge about customs and such like can lead to the romanticised, fossilised idea of cultures which has little relevance to how those cultures are currently expressed. Fourthly, teaching about the expressive, historical aspects of a culture will not help to inform children from such backgrounds about the real nature of the society in which they live.

The 1986 OECD report also raises doubts about whether the schools of modern industrial society can in fact treat minority group culture in anything but a superficial way.

The official school has a universalist vocation: through instruction it transcends particularisms and transmits knowledge that has general application, not tied to local contexts. The school accordingly has a liberating function which is performed through the dissemination of a culture bearing the stamp of logico-mathematical thinking, normally contrasting with the vernacular cultures. We may accordingly
consider whether the official school is intended to safeguard these cultures, if it knows how to do so, and if it is capable of doing so.

Or, again,

By its very nature, education is universalist: as it teaches children to read and write, the school establishes the framework for replacing oral transmission of knowledge by written transmission. Instead of learning in a given context, people learn from a given text ... So the graft of multicultural education onto mainstream education will not automatically take, because it involves inserting local vernacular cultures which are special, context-related cultures into curricula that are organised on a rationalist and universalist footing.

The second, less formal approach to multicultural education (see page 206) may in fact have more long-term benefit for minority ethnic groups and for society as a whole. For Uri Thurmal, multicultural education:

is basically 'education for a multicultural society' an education that enables people here or anywhere else to cope with differences, to be non-judgmental about them and to accept the right of other people to their linguistic, cultural and religious expression. That is the goal, to me, of multicultural education. For that reason I do not believe that multicultural education can manifest itself entirely in such things as teaching of community languages, or in such multicultural activities as food and dance sampling of the different groups that are in Australia. All those things are nice, all those things are valuable, but I do not think that they touch the core of what I would mean by an education for a multicultural society.

Thurmal observes that learning about the language and customs of other cultures does not necessarily result in less discriminatory, more tolerant human beings.

Minority groups themselves are likely to resent their cultures being portrayed in an artificial context which drains them of their deeper meaning. Further, teaching children about other cultures contains an element of risk that it will reinforce and not reduce the sense of distinctiveness of belonging to one group as opposed to other groups. Connor considers that 'minimally it may be asserted that increasing awareness of a second group is not certain to produce harmony, and is at best likely to produce, on balance a negative response.' Also, both the dominant group and minority groups may resent 'excessive' ethnic culture if it is seen to crowd out from the curriculum subjects considered to be more directly relevant to their children's life-chances.

On the question of inter-group harmony and social cohesion, the tentative conclusion must be that there is no clear, single way to proceed. The temptation is, of course, to resort to a naive, simplistic solution for the ideal society, and to impose on the state education system expectations in respect of that solution which it is manifestly unable to fulfil. Experience elsewhere would seem to suggest that the major effort, as regards the state school system, should be on social and civic education including the development of a state of mind that is
both tolerant and analytical of cultural differences. Such an approach would cover broader issues than just inter-ethnic relations, for example, racism, sexism, and participation in social and political life. While the teaching of specific aspects of different cultures may have its place, the expectation as to what this might achieve in terms of inter-group harmony and the preservation of minority cultures should be kept suitably modest.

The other major objective of multicultural education is the improvement of the life chances of minority ethnic groups. In regard to this objective also, there appears to have been considerable utopian enthusiasm, but, according to the OECD 'Children from minority ethnic groups are over-represented among low achievers everywhere.' Also, 'it is disturbing to note that the minority ethnic groups rank equal with the less-favoured occupational categories in producing the largest number of low-achieving children.' While these statements are, no doubt, broadly true, some minority group children do perform very well—for example, it is understood that Japanese and Chinese children in the US tend to be high achievers at school.

The underlying assumption is, presumably, that multicultural education will enhance the self-esteem of children from minority groups and provide a more sympathetic learning environment—thereby promoting their educational success rate and life-chances. As already discussed, there are considerable limitations as to the degree to which the state system, with its own rational, universalist culture, can 'teach' other cultures and provide a cultural setting other than its own. The authors of the article on multicultural education in the *Harvard encyclopaedia of American ethnic groups* provide this caution:

As anthropologists remind us, cultures are not just collections of facts, common memories or vocabularies. When these aspects of culture are taken out of their original context and then reassembled into packaged curricula, they are unlikely to provide the sense of belonging and self-esteem that come from a culturally intact community that enjoys the respect of other communities. Reduced to curricula in the hands of professional educators, they represent an ironic victory of dominant cultural forms.

Yet the cultural setting is clearly important. McDermott argues that the mixture of intelligent socially competent children from a low status minority community and hardworking, well-intentioned teachers from a dominant community can bring about the same disastrous school records achieved by either neurologically disabled children or socially disabled, prejudiced teachers. Student and teachers in such a mix 'usually produce communication breakdown by simply performing routine and practical every day activities in ways their subcultures define as normal and appropriate'. Because behavioural competence is differently defined, many teachers and children fail to establish rational trusting relationships. The result can often be that school failure becomes a peer group goal.
School failure and delinquency often represent highly motivated and intelligent attempts to develop the abilities, statuses, and identities that will best equip the child to maximise his utilities in the politics of everyday life.¹²

There is clearly a tension here. Children from some minority groups cannot make an easy and quick transition to the culture of the modern school system: they will become alienated and disaffected with, possibly life-long, adverse effects on their social and economic chances. But, if they are going to ‘succeed’ in modern technological society, sooner or later they must make the transition to modern culture or, perhaps preferably, learn how to live in both cultures—their own and that of the dominant group.

One answer to this tension is the establishment of schools by ethnic communities to make good the deficiencies or inabilities of the state school system. Bullivant notes that this appears to be happening in Australia.¹³ It is also happening in New Zealand as Te Kohanga Reo and the Maori Access Scheme demonstrate. The development of separate ethnic schools raises the obvious danger of a drift towards separatism. However, it is highly questionable whether ethnic groups can maintain ethnic culture without their own structural and community support. Pratte¹⁴ points out that to be culturally significant, a group needs, inter alia, ‘a sense of historical and participational identity and the peculiar traits which mark the identity must be transmitted from generation to generation if the group is to maintain its identity.’ Clearly a cultural group that is concerned about survival will want to transmit its culture to the very young and this has obvious implications for schooling—especially in the early formative years.

On the question of whether cultural diversity can survive without structural diversity, Jean Martin¹⁵ warns:

The proposition that we are, or are in the process of becoming, a culturally pluralist society has a specifically ideological aspect ... the thesis of cultural pluralism rests on the unspoken assumptions that ethnic culture can be sustained without ethnic communities and that a culturally diverse society is something different from a structurally pluralist one, assumptions that defy the weight of historical experience.

Expectations of the education system as a means of social reconstruction now appear much more modest than those previously held. Research in Britain has shown how slow the attainment of greater educational opportunity for lower working-class children has been since the 1944 Education Act. The following comment suggests that the thesis that schooling reproduces culture, rather than transforms society, still holds good:

The evidence from capitalist and communist countries alike is overwhelmingly that stratification along class, ethnic, status, or cultural lines heavily conditions both what knowledge is regarded as socially valuable and the eagerness and capacity of the children of the different strata to receive it ... There are (in Britain) educational, demographic, economic, and even class forces which in future might favour
high educational standards more equally spread. Even though inequality survived the 1944 Education Act and may find accommodation in a comprehensive system, we cannot yet conclude that class differences are immutable.

Bullivant shares the view that the reconstructionist philosophy is now discredited and that the evidence supports the cultural reproduction thesis, that is, that schooling plays a major part in reproducing inequalities. These inequalities are structural and lie within the public, economic and political domain and are influenced by factors that lie outside the school. Consequently "They are not likely to be countered by programmes of multicultural education." In fact, if overemphasised, multicultural components in the curriculum could direct attention and energy away from mastering basic skills, including the dominant language, that are essential for 'getting on' in modern society. This does not, however, exclude the possibility of some accommodation of minority culture within the learning process—this in fact might, inter alia, improve the ability of minority children to master those 'basic skills'. Nor does it exclude the possibility that fluency in a minority language will enhance achievement in the language and culture of the dominant group.

It is, perhaps, important to recognise that multicultural education is often limited to expressive aspects of culture including its history, language, myths, customs and such like. But culture also has an instrumental value. The 1986 OECD report refers to the fact that the cultural 'fragments' of minority cultures, while having no use for purposes of social or economic success (in terms of modern society), 'provide a moral basis, a form of protection in adversity; they assist survival and strengthen the capacity of minority ethnic groups to endure.' Bullivant develops this theme of culture as a survival mechanism. 'In essence culture is a form of ever-evolving "survival device" based on adaptive change that enables social groups to cope with the problems of living in a particular habitat. It is this kind of culture that children from ethno-cultural groups have to master, rather than a romanticised, fossil-culture based on utopian views of pluralism.' This approach leads Bullivant to conceptualise how groups compete for life-chances in terms of access to economic resources, power and social rewards and how this access can be controlled by the dominant group. The result of this teasing out of the components of culture re-inforces the view already expressed that what the state school can achieve, in terms of the usual expectations of multicultural education is relatively very modest.

Some Conclusions

Two broad conclusions emerge from the above. Firstly, there are some important dilemmas that need to be recognised and carefully addressed. The central
The dilemma is that of reconciling the heterogeneous needs and demands of cultural groups while maintaining the social homogeneity of the state. To avoid both culturally destructive assimilation and divisive separatism it will be necessary to both affirm the essential unity of the constitutional and legal framework of society and, at the same time, enable, through the provision of resources where appropriate, considerable diversity at the cultural level. Another dilemma is posed by the needs of members of some minority groups for education within their own culture, while for 'success', in the terms of modern society, they need to operate successfully within the dominant culture. One approach here is for ethnic communities to establish their own educational institutions to provide a supportive educational base from which children can 'take on' the world of the dominant culture. This, as noted, is already happening. Some will adopt the view that structural diversity will encourage ethnic separatism notwithstanding that separatist tendencies will almost certainly already exist where minority groups feel alienated and frustrated. Clearly there is no one enduring ideal balance to these tensions and dilemmas. It is, rather, a matter that requires ongoing assessment and sensitive political judgement and leadership.

The second broad conclusion is that it is all too easy to entertain simplistic, naive expectations of multicultural education as a means of assisting minority cultures to continue and evolve, of promoting inter-cultural harmony and of increasing the life-chances of the children of minority groups. It was noted that ethnicity involves both objective cultural forms and the subjective views which groups have of themselves and other groups. The state education can only deal with the former, expressive aspects rather than the latter, instrumental aspects of ethnicity. There are considerable limitations in the state system as regards 'teaching' specific minority cultures and, indeed, in some circumstances attempts to do so may be counter-productive in terms of inter-group harmony and the improvement of life-chances. The state school system is much better placed to reach a broad approach to living in modern society including a tolerance and critical appreciation of different cultures. This second broad conclusion, also, raises the difficult question whether meaningful attention to cultural diversity necessarily involves allowing (and funding) structural diversity in terms of the supply of educational services. Clearly the support of structural diversity at the school level would need to be devised in a way that does not jeopardise the essential unity of society. Again this involves difficult judgements, for example about the teaching of values and lifestyles that might tend to undermine national identity and inter-racial harmony.
Notes and References


2 Craft, M. *Education for diversity, the challenge of cultural pluralism*, School of Education, Nottingham University, 1982, p 4.


6 Ibid, p 167.

7 OECD op.cit., (ref 1) p 2.

8 Ibid, p 2.


11 OECD, op.cit., (ref 1) p 11.


18 Ibid, p 169.


21 OECD, op.cit., (ref 1) p 50.

22 Ibid, p 51.


24 OECD, op.cit., (ref 1) p 23.


26 OECD, op.cit., (ref 1) pp 4 and 11.


29. OECD, op.cit., (ref.1) p 7.


33. Ibid, p 173.

34. Ibid, p 204.


40. Ibid, p168.

41. OECD, op.cit., (ref.1) p 4.