Priorities, strategies and challenges:
Proactive leadership in multi-ethnic schools

Professor Allan Walker
Chair of the Department of Educational Administration and Policy
Chinese University of Hong Kong

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Introduction

The education of diverse groups of students from different cultural and ethnic minorities continues to climb higher on political, social and educational agendas the world over (Banks & McGee Banks, 2003). How best to meet the needs of minority students and the communities they represent has for many years presented serious challenges to schools and school systems. These challenges have recently become more complex as global, social and domestic demography has shifted in response to political and economic circumstances, and through both forced and voluntary migration (Gardner, 2001). The challenges facing societies and schools responsible for providing worthwhile, socially responsible and equitable education to diverse groups are at once both exciting and frightening. They are exciting not only for the potential vibrancy and richness they carry but also for their promise to help build a more equitable and even society, although this promise could be articulated more strongly. The challenges are frightening because they confront prejudice, injustice and historical misconceptions that are so profoundly entrenched in the fabric of our systems that they often appear insurmountable.

The challenges of multi-cultural education are not confined within national or societal boundaries. Educators in countries from New Zealand to Holland, Australia to Canada, Singapore to the US, and China to the UK, to name but some, face common if differently shaped issues at various stages of maturity. For example, Singaporean schools have, since national formation, consciously structured to battle racism and advance educational opportunities for Indian, Malay, Chinese and Eurasian students, while Hong Kong schools are only now becoming broadly aware of multi-cultural education. Australian, US and New Zealand schools continue to battle institutionalised racism and endemic underachievement of both indigenous groups and other ethnic minorities. Gay (2004, p 30) describes the latter of these problems in the US thus: "As disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes among ethnic groups continue to grow, the resulting achievement gap has reached crisis proportions." Similar problems persist for certain ethnic groups in British schools – where the students "most likely to underachieve come from African-Caribbean, Bangladeshi and Pakistani backgrounds" (Gillborn & Gipps, 1996 cited in Blair, 2002, p 82).

The real work of designing and implementing meaningful programmes for minority students falls squarely on the shoulders of teachers, mid-level school leaders, parents, school support staff and headteachers, often in partnership with various formal and informal community support and interest groups. The focus of this report is headteachers in schools with substantial numbers of minority ethnic students.

This report is based on data collected from the headteachers of five case study schools as part of a larger project. It focused on the leadership of schools with substantial numbers of minority ethnic students and was undertaken by the University of Leicester's Centre for Leadership and Management on behalf of the National College for School Leadership (NCSL). The headteachers all had established reputations as 'good leaders' of multi-ethnic schools. The mother project collected perceptions from a range of formal school leaders, teachers, students and community members — this paper draws on perceptions of the headteachers themselves — and attempts to locate some of the challenges they face within an international context. As part of a larger project, it aims to complement the findings and discussion in CELM (2004a; 2004b). This segment of the investigation has three main aims:

- to gather the views of headteachers of issues related to their leadership of schools with substantial numbers of minority ethnic students

- to clarify the major priorities and associated effective practices employed by headteachers in leading multi-ethnic schools

- to discuss the tensions and challenges faced by the headteachers as they attempt to exercise effective leadership

This report has four major sections. The first section introduces the headteachers as proactive and active leaders committed to addressing issues of social justice in their schools. Five forms of proactive leadership are described. The second section briefly outlines the six major priorities of the headteachers. These focus on demanding that staff work to understand the values and needs of the students, locating the school firmly within its constituency and building an inclusive culture. The third section attempts to isolate some of the strategies employed by the headteachers as they pursued their priorities. For example, the headteachers actively reaffirmed and encouraged the values and contributions of ethnic-minority staff and community members. The fourth section discusses the often complex challenges facing the headteachers involved in the study. These challenges are augmented by related discussion from other contexts and raise awareness of the difficulties headteachers currently face and will continue to face. The data and ideas reported do not presume to cover all the priorities, strategies and challenges facing headteachers; this would be impossible to achieve here. However, they do represent at least some of the major issues and summarise their 'values-driven' attempts to make a difference in the lives of the students in their schools.

Headteachers as proactive leaders

> The tendency to locate the blame for underachievement in students and their communities overlooks the role of schools as institutions, and teachers and headteachers as leaders, in processes that lead to poor student performance. (Blair, 2002, p 182)

The headteachers in the multi-ethnic schools involved in the study held a clearly articulated and unwavering commitment to attacking ingrained societal inequalities, particularly racism and poverty; and saw this as inexorably linked to student achievement. They did not rest on their laurels or rhetoric of their values and beliefs — they loudly proclaimed them and expended considerable strategic and practical energy to bring them into practice, often in the face of quite daunting obstacles.

The headteachers involved in the study were both active and proactive in anticipating future problems, needs or changes based predominantly on what the school could do to equalise opportunities for their students. Like their colleagues in Singapore (Walker & Dimmock, 2002a) and the US (Henze, 2000), they showed that, despite powerful constraints, they believed they could make a difference, to equal opportunities and improved race relations.

The beliefs and strategic intentions of the headteachers in the study showed dedication to recognising what Banks (1994) labels 'cultural difference' rather than 'cultural deficit'. Cultural deficit is the notion that students from minority ethnic groups often fail in school because of the culture they have grown up in. The assumption is that ethnic minority students do not have the skills and knowledge to succeed – in short, that the culture of the student is the problem, not the culture of the school. Following this line of thinking, action toward multi-culturalism is isolated and does not target the school as the unit of change. Cultural difference, on the other hand, assumes that minority ethnic students often fail because they have different values to that of the school, not because they are culturally deficient. Following this assumption, schools must themselves change to respect and include all cultures and institute strategies consistent with the cultural characteristics of the students (Minnesota Independent School Forum, 2001).

The headteachers in the study took a proactive approach, which demonstrated their dedication to cultural difference. They used the following strategies:

- First, they held strong, equity-focused values and were almost aggressive in communicating these within and outside school boundaries. Their values were very personal to their educational and personal existence and vision - this appeared the main factor driving their constant and *forceful messaging*.

- Second, as well as wearing their values 'on their sleeves', they regularly reflected upon these values and how to *apply them practically* as strategies within their schools and the broader community.

- Third, they did not just follow policy but worked actively to shape it, even though the sometimes uneven intersection between broad government policy and priorities unique to their school and community resulted in stressful tension. The headteachers vigorously sought to '*build synergy'* internally and between external and internal priorities to promote equality and inclusion.

- Fourth, the leaders were proactive in their almost unshakeable belief that they could and would *make a positive difference* not only in the immediate lives and learning of

their students, but also to the disadvantages and inequalities too often attached to ethnicity and racism. The headteachers were generally positive people, even though they admitted they had a difficult road ahead and faced considerable tension along the way.

- Finally, the headteachers were not blind-optimists; their pro-activeness was *grounded firmly in the realities* of their own unique contexts. They stressed again and again, as do their colleagues in other countries, that each school, each community, each ethnic group and positions within the same ethnic group vary - often to a significant degree.

In sum, the headteachers involved in the study were realistically proactive. They held strong personal beliefs about what they and their schools were attempting to do, they openly expressed and put into practice their values using a range of strategies. They were transformers — who demanded action and commitment — rather than tolerators (Minnesota Independent School Forum, 2001) or tinkerers; they strongly believed that they could make a difference in their schools but were realistic about the influence of their context on what could be achieved – in other words, they recognised the inherent tensions of their job. They differentiated themselves from other cohorts of principals through their dedication to tackle aggressively disadvantages related to ethnicity, racism, culture and poverty. In short, they were committed to implementing in a very practical or 'hands-on' way the principles of social justice.

Priorities, strategies and challenges

The work of the headteachers involved in the study can be described in any number of ways. For the purposes of this report, it will be discussed in terms of their priorities and strategies, and the challenges they face. Findings within each of these elements reflect the headteachers' predisposition to take a proactive approach to school leadership.

- *Priorities* here refer to the values, beliefs and principles that the headteachers sought vigorously to embed into the life and operation of their schools. The priorities discussed here are not intended to encapsulate all those held by the heads, but do represent the strongest patterns that emerged from the data. In many ways, the six priorities identified represent the non-negotiable or fundamental principles that guided their attempts to address learning, living and social justice issues in their schools.

- *Strategies* refer to the concrete actions taken by the principals to meet their priorities. Of course the strategies varied considerably in terms of their shape and intensity across schools in line with their micro-contexts. They do, however, represent a collection of intentional actions taken by the headteachers. Although organised under priorities, the strategies were neither always linear nor deliberate, and shifted in line with local conditions and the head's predispositions.

- *Challenges* are tensions, confusions or dilemmas faced by the headteachers as they attempted to pursue their complex agendas. These often resulted from contradictory expectations, for example, between government policy and headteacher priorities, between academic and social agendas or between personal and group goals. The challenges discussed include those raised by the heads involved in the study, as well as a number of those that appear in some international literature.

The following sections scan the headteachers' priorities and strategies as well as the challenges they do or may well face during their tenure. The discussion draws on the conversations with the heads and a selection of international literature. Greater information, particularly relating to the priorities and strategies, can be accessed from the sister reports.

Priorities

The headteachers' values-driven priorities can be roughly grouped into six inter-related statements. The statements strongly reflect the principled and proactive pursuit of equity and equality. The priorities are given in no particular order as all appeared of approximately equal strength. Interestingly, they fit neatly with Blair, Bourne & Coffin's (1998) features of successful multi-ethnic schools. "The most important characteristics of a leader . . . who is creating or who is going to create an equitable and excellent school is that this person has developed a strong ethical or moral core focused on equity and excellence as the only right choice for schools in a democracy. For this person, this is an indomitable belief, an indomitable commitment." (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003, p 100)

The heads' six most visible priorities are introduced below:

1. Professional and other staff are committed to social justice and equality

The headteachers were genuinely committed to the principles of social justice and redressing inequality at all levels through what happened in their schools; and demanded that others working there held similar beliefs. As one headteacher stated: "I think the key quality is being prepared to stand up for what you believe is right in human justice terms . . . If you're not committed to that type of belief, I don't believe you can work in any school, but you certainly can't work in this school." It has been recently suggested that these are key beliefs in Australian and US schools catering for ethnic minorities. Cooper and Jordon (2003) go as far as to suggest that the current school restructuring movement should include the restructuring of the norms that drive school mission and operation. They tie their argument strongly to catering for disadvantaged minority students:

> Restructuring of the norms that guide and direct policy and practice refers to altering institutional ethos in ways that value and celebrate the unique contribution and learning style of each student. This involves seeing racial affirmation, cultural history, family background, and native language other than English as assets to the learning process not as barriers to intellectual pursuits. (p 387)

2. Professional and other staff demonstrate a willingness to understand the culture and background of their students and school community

The headteachers themselves worked hard to understand their students' beliefs and value structures and to appreciate reality through their eyes. They also promoted this strongly among staff and the wider community, particularly in schools from a number of different ethnic minorities. Heads constantly reiterated to staff the need to locate their leadership and work within the unique context of their school.

3. Recruitment and retention of staff with similar cultural and ethnic backgrounds to those in the school community

In line with the first two priorities, headteachers believed it was important that the staff profile, as much as possible, parallel the ethnic profile of the school. They placed a high priority on both the recruitment and development of suitable staff with the idea that they would provide positive role-models for the students and cultural knowledge that comes only from living inside a culture. Achieving a balanced staff profile was also seen as a means for openly expressing the school's dedication to its students and community.

4. Connecting the school strongly with its immediate and broader societal context

The headteachers openly recognised that their schools could not be successful if they operated in a vacuum. They, without exception, stressed the importance of understanding and connecting with the broader community and that the unique blend of local circumstances had a marked influence on their leadership and the culture of the school. The heads saw working beyond the school as essential if students were to achieve results within the school.

5.   Promoting the importance of improving quality learning and teaching as a way of addressing disadvantage

High-quality learning and teaching was seen as a necessary prerequisite for raising student self-esteem, achieving school mission, improving achievement scores, and widening pathways to battle racism and other inequalities.

6.   Consciously constructing and nurturing an inclusive school culture

As reflected in the other main priorities, the headteachers clearly linked their values to inclusive school cultures. A school-wide belief in inclusive cultures was seen as more important, or at least more influential, than technical systems or structures, although these were also seen as integral for facilitating inclusion.

The following section outlines a number of the strategies employed by the heads to put into practice their chief priorities. These are in outline form only and it should be noted that there was no 'best' strategy associated with any of the priorities – some worked in one context, but not in another, and vice versa. Discussion of the strategies is worthwhile, however, as they provide a pool of ideas that have been shown to be useful in multi-ethnic schools, often in challenging circumstances.

Strategies

1.   Professional and other staff are committed to social justice and equality

The headteachers clearly and regularly articulated these values and made no secret of the fact that they should drive school relationships and actions. They moved beyond the 'said' to link explicitly the priority to practical school activities, such as mission development, teaching and planning. For example, values demanding social justice were evident in formal school communication devices, such as the mission statement and school improvement plans. Through this widespread articulation, both in and out of school forums, staff were provided with opportunities to challenge wider structural inequities and ways to deal with these. While they recognised the constraints to embedding values coherence among staff, the headteachers were unapologetic about the openness of their quest and its importance in underpinning school success.

The headteachers' proactive approach to social justice saw them addressing the subtly-embedded causes of ethnic conflict (such as racism), not simply its visible indicators. In their own ways, they recognised how conflict in the school and in the community were related. They appeared to view conflicts through a similar guise to that described by Henze (2000) when reporting the findings of a large-scale US research project into racial/ethnic tensions in schools. Henze's sample group involved schools where there was evidence of innovative leadership to improve inter-ethnic relations. She found that school leaders viewed conflicts on a continuum. To use her words: "The most overt conflicts, such as physical fights and racial slurs, are at one end; underlying conflicts and tensions, such as avoidance of certain groups and perceptions of unequal treatment, are in the middle. At the other end are the root causes of ethnic/racial conflicts, including segregation, racism and inequality – conditions endemic to the larger society…" (p 2). Purposeful strategies that pushed staff to look beneath the obvious — constantly challenging their world views and encouraging them into the community — served to re-focus attention consistently on the need for social justice to be reflected across school life.

2.   Professional and other staff demonstrate a willingness to understand the culture and background of their students and school community

Closely aligned with strategies associated with the previous priority, heads strongly encouraged staff — both teaching and support — to view the school and broader society through the eyes of their students and the communities they served. Such action was based on the belief that the meanings that students attached to the world were fashioned by their culture and place in society. The headteachers helped staff to see, for example, that refugee children often carried memories of harrowing experiences from their home countries and the sometimes perilous journeys they had undertaken. Likewise, Muslim students had very different interpretations of the events surrounding September 11 than other ethnic groups. Heads were careful to note though that such interpretations also varied markedly among Muslims themselves, depending on other factors such as socio-economic status (SES) or length of time in Britain. Headteachers encouraged understanding through celebrating cultural occasions and asking staff to 'get into' the community.

Strategies to promote a cultural understanding are also seen as essential in other countries. Cooper and Jordon (2003, p 287) stress that, if the emphasis is to shift from academic failure to an examination of alternative structures and practices that lead to improved academic achievement, teachers, leaders and others must view different ethnic groups positively — or in terms of their successes, not just failures. The heads in the study acknowledged this not only by requiring that staff look empathetically at the backgrounds of their students, but also by revising their human resource policies. Among these was their approach to professional development, which in some schools was integrated closely with knowing the community – such as language background, SES, primary school background and cultural awareness (Boothe, 2000).

3.   Recruitment and retention of staff with similar cultural and ethnic backgrounds to those in the school community

The headteachers went to considerable lengths to try to develop a staff profile that broadly reflected the ethnic profile of the school community. This strategy targeted both teaching and non-teaching staff. In many instances, this was a difficult task. The schools' challenging urban situations meant that even recruiting enough staff was a problem, regardless of ethnicity, particularly with senior staff. Such problems seemed common whether the school was largely mono- or multi-cultural. The heads actively (even aggressively) tried to recruit qualified and/or experienced teachers from appropriate ethnic minorities. However, since this met with minimal success in most sites, a number of headteachers instituted a more 'home grown' approach. This strategy mainly involved two, sometimes related, strategies. The first was to identify potential future teachers, provide them with involvement through non-teaching roles and then work on nurturing them toward qualified teacher status. The second was to try to achieve a more balanced profile through increasing the number of ethnic minorities in non-teaching support roles.

Other long-term strategies for retaining and attracting staff involved openly valuing and rewarding involvement by all staff, not just teachers, and focus on any special contributions made by staff of different ethnic backgrounds. Extra effort was sometimes made to encourage participation by these groups in response to language or cultural barriers. Such positive encouragement is also considered important in the US, where Mobokela and Madsen (2003, p 108) recommend that: ". . . school leaders [need to] take proactive steps to scrutinize their organisational culture and create an environment that is supportive to African American Teachers and teachers of colour".

The headteachers in the study also placed a premium on professional learning and career development opportunities as a way of retaining and even attracting the right staff. These strategies were strongly linked to building an inclusive school culture, one where the heads

worked hard to create organisations where staff wanted to be and could make sense of what they were doing, in both social justice and academic terms. As with all strategies, the heads were realistically proactive – they did not underestimate the difficulties of hiring and retaining the right staff – but chose to approach the exercise in a positive way. This issue is further discussed in the section on building an inclusive school culture.

4.   Connecting the school strongly with its immediate and broader societal context

> Emancipatory leaders know when they are out of their depth in complex socio cultural areas: they acknowledge the greater expertise of community members or colleagues in certain situations linked to concerns for diversity, and they act accordingly. (Corson, 1998, p 16)

All the headteachers recognised the importance of connecting with and understanding their extended communities. Such communities included those directly associated with the students, and the various social, social service and community groups with a meaningful place in their lives. Strategies for locating the school within its context involved inviting people into the school and moving purposefully outside school boundaries. Both forms of linkage were vital and considered critical to a school's ability to make a difference to their students' lives and learning.

Involvement within the school included inviting students, parents, governors and other community groups to serve on school committees. It was emphasised that these committees were 'real' and not just concerned with selective events such as organising 'cultural festivities', for example. Moving outside school boundaries was equally important for the heads and all other staff members. External connection was necessary for the heads personally as it demonstrated their commitment to their students and their circumstances. It also allowed them to set their leadership in the contexts of their students more effectively. Similarly, moving into the community allowed (or forced) other staff to understand more fully the cultural heritage of their students and also sensitise their awareness of community concerns and aspirations.

Through their efforts to build coherent values within their school and to locate these schools squarely in their broader community, the heads attempted to increase leadership density – a density grounded in shared ownership and responsibility. Henze's (2000, p 3) description of US principals captures succinctly the essence of what the heads were trying to do: "This (involving multiple people and ethnic groups) paved the way for more diverse leaders to take on formal leadership roles in the future, and ensured that efforts to improve human relations were not "owned" by any one individual or group. Thus they had a greater likelihood of being sustained."

Locating the school within the wider community consumed considerable time and other resources but was non-negotiable in terms of making schools meaningful places for the minority students. Again, although the leaders had a clear vision of how to connect with the community there was no 'best' way to do it. The headteachers saw school governance issues as stretching well beyond traditional school boundaries and toward greater inter-agency collaboration. Although such inter-agency links have traditionally been weak (Capper, 1996), such collaboration was seen as providing a powerful means for understanding, interacting with and empowering different minority groups. Capper suggests that community-based inter-agency collaboration can promote the involvement of traditionally disempowered groups across the gamut of human welfare service provision. Connections deliberately and consciously forged between the school, systems, agencies

and informal community service organisations that have long been seen as peripheral to schools can be harnessed to promote meaningful multi-culturalism in schools.

5.   Promoting the importance of improving quality learning and teaching as a way of addressing disadvantage

Headteachers of schools with varied multi-ethnic populations implemented strategies to monitor or track performance by different ethnic groups. This was seen as a way to assist the school to identify achievement patterns, and then plan and apply appropriate interventions. There did not appear, however, to be formal strategies in place to track shifts (positive or negative) in attitudes to racism, for example.

The headteachers accentuated the importance of teaching and learning in their schools, and of infusing culture into the curriculum. They encouraged staff to structure curricular experiences that reflected cultural diversity, and countered racism and other forms of discrimination. However, reflections of ethnic diversity, as recognised by the heads, tended to be restricted to arts subjects, such as art and drama, and there seemed little direct acknowledgement of the influence of culture on learning styles. The heads linked the balance of staff and student profiles to building a more diverse approach to curriculum, but progress often seemed blocked by more pragmatic policy pressures.

Of the priorities identified, and the strategies implemented, efforts to address ethnic diversity in the classroom generally, and in particular in learning, showed that there was little direct account taken for ethnic diversity in terms of teaching and learning in most classrooms.

6.   Consciously constructing and nurturing an inclusive school culture

In pulling together the priorities, the headteachers sought to build and foster an inclusive school culture – ie that reflected the ethnic and cultural diversity of the broader school community. Such a culture has been defined in the US as one: "…in which students from diverse racial, ethnic, and social groups believe that they are heard and are valued and experience respect, belonging and encouragement." (Parks, 1999, p 11). The heads in this study in many ways mirrored this belief. To build and sustain an inclusive culture, the heads vigorously promoted the participation and representation of the range of actors, from students to teachers to parents to community groups. They established structures for this involvement, for example, through student councils, professional development days, prefect systems and community-linked groups. In this endeavour, the headteachers once again attempted to reflect the ethnic make-up of the student body.

While recognising that differences within, as well as between, ethnic groups was a key leadership issue, the headteachers nurtured the inclusivity of their organisations' cultures through celebrating ethnic diversity as reflected in student projects and other outputs. They also consciously sought to build the self-esteem of staff, students and others associated with the school. The culture building acknowledged the inseparability of bureaucratic or structural linkages from those of a cultural nature. They implemented supportive and influential structures and systems, such as clear policies against racism (which they ensured were understood), and established committees to promote inclusion and monitor change initiatives. Disrespecting people on ethnic or other grounds was frowned upon and carried defined consequences. Resource allocation was also considered an important strategy to build a focused and inclusive culture. The level of resources devoted to multi-cultural activities and how they are distributed in support of a multi-cultural curriculum can indicate how seriously a school regards multi-culturalism.

Headteachers saw building inclusive school cultures that reflected the values of multi-culturalism as a key responsibility. As illustrated in the above priorities, they acknowledged that culture is partly built and influenced through their modelling and demonstrating their own

values in interacting with others, making appropriate public pronouncements, establishing supportive reward and discipline systems, and valuing students from all races and ethnicities. Banks (1993, p 17) refers to 'an empowering school culture', where a learning environment is created in which students from diverse racial, ethnic and social groups believe that they are heard, valued and that they experience respect, belonging and encouragement.

For all of the strategies, the headteachers rejected a one-size-fits-all framework – they continually returned to the uniqueness of their environment (Henze, 2000). While claiming considerable progress in their schools, they acknowledged that not everything was working, that both personal and institutionalised racism remained widespread and that academic under-achievement continued to plague their schools. These and other tensions disrupted their priorities and associated strategies but, in the process, may serve as sparks to further positive avenues for their leadership.

The headteachers' priorities and strategies seemed to match quite closely with what Lindsey, Robins and Terrell (1999) call 'culturally proficient leadership'. The authors define five essential elements of cultural proficiency and then describe the principals' responsibility within these elements. In outline, these elements are (p 54):

- *Value diversity*: the articulation of a culturally proficient vision for the school

- *Access culture*: assessment of the culture/s of the school

- *Manage the dynamic of difference*: the provision of training and support systems for conflict resolution

- *Institutionalise cultural knowledge*: Model and monitor school-wide and classroom practices

- *Adapt to diversity*: Access and change current practices where appropriate

Although dedicated and proficient, the headteachers continued to face significant often complex challenges.

Leadership challenges

The challenges discussed in this section cut across the priorities and strategies. This reflects the reality of school life, which can rarely be neatly categorised. At least four major challenges emerged from the study.

1.   The challenge of seeing more than ethnicity

One of the major challenges for heads in schools with significant numbers of ethnic minority students is the apparently paradoxical issue of encouraging staff and others to build understanding of the values, beliefs and underpinnings of ethnic cultures in order to address learning and social justice issues. At the same time, they must help others to realise that other contextual factors are also vital when building school and community capacity. Headteachers in the study had to fight the assumption that ethnicity on its own was at the root of all disadvantage, and that, if this were addressed, the school would automatically become more successful. Whereas there is no doubting the relationship between ethnicity and social disadvantage, other factors also play a major role. For example, SES, geographical location and history, local politics and the stability of the school population all have powerful effects on the student and school success. One notable example of this, as explained by one leader, was that within and outside the school 'white' students are

categorised in terms of SES or social class, while 'non-white' students are categorised only in terms of their ethnicity. This discounts the fact that economic and class distinctions are as broad within as between ethnic groups. It can also give the false impression that all members of an easily identifiable ethnic group hold the same values, beliefs and predilections, or that ethnic homogeneity requires less active leadership and understanding. This has implications for leadership and staff management, as one African American teacher in the US stated: "Teachers here think I know everything about black children, but I never grew up in the city and never experienced the difficulties these students have had…Yet, the teachers expect me to have access to every black student, and I find that really troubling." (cited in Mobokela and Madsen, 2003, p 104). The challenge of parallel staffing is discussed in more detail below. Another example of contextual influence in some settings is the transient nature of certain groups (for example, asylum seekers). This is often accompanied by disturbances in inter-ethnic hierarchies, which can destabilise the school community and even increase conflict within the school and the wider community.

A related challenge is that many schools are faced with catering for not one, or even two, but for a multitude of different ethnic groups. Given that diverse groups can hold vastly different values and expectations, this can create blockages to building a school where social justice is not only addressed, but is also seen to be addressed for all. Given the energy, time and openness needed to explore and understand any group (not to mention individual students), this is a huge task and can distract from the academic job of teachers. Understanding diverse ethnic groups can also be fraught with misunderstanding because it can lead to dangerous overgeneralisation about specific racial groups and the differences between them. The challenge again is to build awareness that just as many differences may exist within as between different ethnic groups. As can be seen clearly in the Singapore context, groups within groups can look very different, depending on multiple contextual factors, including their history, politics and socio-economic profile (Walker & Dimmock, 2002a).

A word of caution is necessary here. Although the challenge to see through and beyond ethnicity needs to be addressed, it is important that this does not overshadow the fact that huge gaps in achievement continue between minority and majority students regardless of other factors. Citing Gillborn & Mirza (2000, p 64), Gardner (2001, p 45) reminds us.

> A child's social class is an influential factor in educational achievement and, although since the 1980s the gap in attainment between the highest and lowest social classes has widened and is evident within ethnic groups, certain minority ethnic groups continue to underachieve even when class is taken into account.

All headteachers are charged with building firm links with the broader community, and recognising their students' communities are important, even when they do not geographically surround their schools. There is no best way of connecting with the community and heads are continually challenged by how to balance personal and organisational resources in pursuit of this connection, especially when they face obstacles such as language and differing work patterns. This challenge can be accentuated in some contexts because of the imposition of preferential boundary areas, where, as a consequence of parent choice, the school and their immediate communities are geographically disconnected.

Structural inequities and inequalities, such as those associated with gender, ethnicity and class, present a major challenge to creating inclusive cultures. The goal is to build understanding of and respect for ethnicity and culture across all facets of school life, at the same time ensuring that their schools are not constructed purely in terms of ethnicity or ethnic homogeneity.

2.   The challenge of 'using' culture to improve learning and teaching

> School administrators and teachers should not only capitalise on students' inherent characteristics and tendencies to improve student learning but also use the opportunity to expand personal expectations and behaviours. (Escobar-Ortloff & Ortloff, 2003, p 256)

Headteachers must also consider how to make the curriculum and, particularly, learning and teaching, more sensitive and responsive to ethnic or cultural background. This study found that culture, more often than not, was 'left at the classroom door', and that the influence of culture on learning and teaching was played down, sometimes because of the demands of central assessment requirements. This tension between local context and policy was accentuated (if not driven) by the limited extent to which the formal curriculum reflected ethnic diversity. One challenge then is to find ways to expand awareness of the place of culture in learning and teaching while also addressing the more instrumental approaches demanded by common accountability mechanisms. A continued concentration on the latter may lead to neglected opportunities to infuse culture into the curriculum, which may in turn negatively impact on student engagement, achievement and outcomes.

Given the continued gap in academic achievement between ethnic majority and most ethnic minority students, culture-bound approaches to teaching and learning must be challenged (Dimmock, 2000). Cooper and Jordon (2003) note (when discussing African-American male students) that minority students can be better served educationally when traditional notions of teaching and learning are re-conceptualised. It is axiomatic that different cognitive strategies used by students for learning have implications for teachers in their choice of teaching strategies and for leaders in promoting 'good' learning cultures and practices in schools. The nurturing of learning is part of instructional leadership. Since the cognitive processes and technical skills involved in learning vary across cultures, this should be reflected in different interpretations of instructional leadership. Moreover, conceptions of the 'good student' and the 'good teacher' also vary cross-culturally. According to Watkins (2002), a 'good student' in a country such as Australia, regardless of ethnicity, is seen as one who pays attention to the teacher and does what he or she is told. In China, however, this is the expectation of all students, with the result that teachers can focus more on academic and social matters. Likewise, students see the 'good teacher' in countries such as New Zealand as one who raises students' interest and uses an array of effective teaching methods. In contrast, the perception of an effective teacher held by Hong Kong students tends to centre on warm, caring, friendly relations combined with deep subject knowledge and an ability to model a strong set of morals - all within a hierarchical structure (Walker, 2004). Notions of what constitutes effective group work and questioning also differs between many British and Chinese students (Dimmock & Walker, in press).

Drawing on his rich experience as a principal of a multi-ethnic school in the US, Adcock (1997) expresses his pragmatic view of why the challenge of understanding culture in teaching and learning is so vital. He states:

> Effective learning in a multicultural setting depends on "comprehensible input" – that is the level at which the teacher can make content understandable to the learner. This can be done in a number of ways which include using the student's native language, using visual supports such as gestures, pictures, maps etc. to enrich what is being said… (p 3)

Another dimension of this challenge is for headteachers to find ways to support staff when the demands for inclusion and for improved results in public examinations appear opposed. Staying true to personal values when they may threaten your job security, and convincing others to do the same, is certainly a test of anyone's values. To help teachers meet these sometimes contradictory forces, heads can work to provide a professional learning programme in the school that helps teachers understand the influence of culture and ethnicity on learning and teaching, and how to design appropriate programmes and pedagogies to take advantage of this.

An example of culture-sensitive teaching strategies (or what Banks (1993) refers to as 'equity pedagogy'), is provided by Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield and Trumbull (1999). These authors describe the problems faced by many teachers in the US who have Latino children from Central and South America in their classes. These immigrant children bring collectivist values with them to school, making it invaluable for their teachers to understand the ramifications of collectivism in an otherwise individualist society. Collectivism emphasises the interdependence of family members and children are taught, above all, to be helpful to others and to contribute to the success and welfare of the group to which they belong - beginning with the family. Even the knowledge of the physical world is placed within a social context. In reality, American, Australian and British schools tend to foster individualism, viewing the child as an individual who needs to develop independence and value individual achievement. While collectivism emphasises the social context of learning and knowledge, individualism emphasises information disengaged from its social context. As Rothstein-Fisch et al. (1999) comment, "When collectivistic students encounter individualistic schools, conflicts that are based on hidden values and assumptions can occur" (p 64). They go on to illustrate how children from collectivist cultures can misinterpret the teacher's expectations when asked questions. They also show how teachers can incorporate more collectivist values by encouraging children to do tasks in pairs and groups, and by allowing the children to introduce elements of their social life and background into science lessons. They conclude,

> When teachers understand and respect the collectivist values of immigrant Latino children, the opportunities for culturally informed learning become limitless. Our examples in classroom management, reading, math, and science demonstrate that educators can design instruction responsive to diverse groups that does not undermine home-based cultural values (p 66).

The headteacher's task is to help teachers, regardless of ethnicity, to realise that their own practices are cultural in origin rather than there being 'only right way to do things'. This is important; research in the US has found that teachers often modify their pedagogical practices in response to cultural difference (Mobokela & Madsen, 2003). Heads can encourage teachers to explore these cultural differences as opportunities to expand their knowledge of learning styles and their repertoire of teaching techniques, classroom management and curriculum tailoring just as they encourage them to get into their communities to understand more general values and traditions. As Cunningham and Cordeiro (2000) note: "Teachers who accept cultural pluralism constantly ask themselves how to help students respect and appreciate cultural diversity in the classroom, school and society." (p 105)

3.   The challenge of parallel staffing

One of the headteachers' major priorities is to develop a staff profile that matches the student profile. This is indeed a challenge, and it is not as simple as equalising the ethnic profile of staff. Before discussing some of the issues around this priority, it should be noted that it is important to have suitable numbers of teachers with the same ethnic origins as the

students (Blair, Bourne & Coffin, 1998). However, research in the US has shown that 'token' representation of minorities tends to highlight their visibility within the organisation, and this can be problematic. Citing Kanter (1977); Cose (1993) and Anderson (1999), Mobokela and Madsen (2003) explain that this can lead to the marginalisation of minority workers; their comments may also hold credence for tailoring approaches to learning and teaching.

> This (the presence of minority workers) results in a polarization where the minority worker threatens the commonality of the group and is made to feel like an outsider. Thus, majority workers create group solidarity by emphasising those cultural elements that they share in contrast to those of the minority person… Because of these heightened boundaries, minorities are forced into pre-existing generalizations, which results in them being entrapped in a role within the organization. Because of role entrapment, minorities have to cope with status levelling and stereotypical role induction. (p 92)

In their own study of African-American teachers, Mobokela and Madsen (2003) found that 'boundary heightening' influenced their interaction with European American teachers in terms of differences in pedagogical and management strategies, debunking negative stereotypes held about children of colour and negotiating insider-outsider statues. In terms of the latter, the minority teachers 'were seen as insiders who provided insights about students of colour', but, on the other hand, 'they were treated as outsiders whose narrowly defined African-American expertise resulted in their being isolated and unable to attain informal social power' (p 102). Based on the lessons of such experience, the trick for heads is not only to hire more minority teachers, but to make sure that those already employed feel valued for more than just their cultural knowledge and connection. The headteachers in this study seemed well aware of this challenge.

Based on the above discussion, three further associated issues challenge heads of schools with large numbers of ethnic minority students.

The first challenge is for heads to develop school cultures where individuality, especially for minority teachers, is as valued as their association with a particular ethnic group.

The second, again recognised by the headteachers in this study, is not just how to hire minority teachers, but also how to help minority educators prepare for formal leadership positions within the school and broader education system. Henze (2000) suggested that perhaps the most effective way of addressing this challenge is to build an inclusive school culture that promotes and values denser and more diverse approaches to both formal and informal leadership.

The third and perhaps most difficult is the challenge of deciding whether effectiveness as a teacher, or the membership of a certain ethnic group, is more important for a school. Cooper and Jordan (2003, p 391) claim that 'though an effective teacher of any racial background is more preferable for Black male students than an ineffective teacher of African American descent,' the advantage of the latter in terms of successful role modelling, use of shared knowledge and, sometimes, shared social experiences, may hold great potential for raising success rates. However, as the same authors point out, this is complicated further by the fact that most black male teachers are, by definition, middle class. So the challenge is in no way as straightforward as achieving cultural synchronisation – progress in matching ethnic mixes between teachers and students may well rest more on teacher and leader preparation programmes, and affirmative in-school professional learning opportunities.

Challenges of parallel staffing are further complicated in some settings, such as the UK, where a national teacher shortage endures, particularly in urban schools, which tend to enrol greater numbers of ethnic minority students. This often makes recruiting any staff difficult, much less staff representative of the student population.

4.   The challenge of professional leadership learning

Growe, Schmersahl, Perry and Henry (2002) state that, while US principals are under increasing pressure to develop empowering school cultures that create learning environments to support students regardless of ethnic background or social class, they are being inadequately prepared for the job. The same must be said for school leaders the world over. The challenge for headteachers in the UK and beyond, and the systems which propose to support them, is how to improve both pre and ongoing learning opportunities to improve their work in schools. As Shields, Laroque, and Oberg (2002) claim, cross-cultural leadership is also beset by problems (also see Walker & Dimmock, 2002b). In many cases, school leaders' perspectives are too narrow, failing to reject 'deficit thinking' about ethnic minority students rather than positive 'capacity building' strategies. Even 'with the best intentions [they frequently] make unwarranted assumptions' (p 130). They may assume that surface harmony indicates an absence of underlying conflict, even though it may merely indicate suppression of fear of further labelling or disadvantage. It therefore follows that there is a need for heads and systems to design more effective training and continued professional learning in multicultural education for themselves, their communities and their staff (Walker & Dimmock, in press).

A number of authors in different countries have drawn attention to the shortfalls of learning opportunities for leading and managing multicultural schools (eg Newton, 2001; Collarbone, 2001; Dimmock & Walker, in press). Comments generally relate to the generic, cross-phase nature of the training with insufficient regard paid to specific school context, as well as the unquestioned assumptions of the leadership models and theories that underpin such programmes. As scholars such as Hallinger and Kantamara (2002) and Walker and Dimmock (2002b) have noted, the development of leadership theory for diversity may require new paradigms and ways of thinking. The leadership learning situation in the US is a case in point. In an incisive critique of the US 'license schemes' for school principals, Hess (2003) draws attention to the weakness of overly generic programmes, stating instead that the emphasis should be placed on having the right leader for the right situation, rather than a particular type of leader for all situations. He states:

> "There is legitimate concern that leaders should be sensitive to the cultural needs of the organizations they lead. However, administrative preparation today devotes little or no attention to such considerations" (p 9).

As a consequence, there are major barriers to diversity, partly due to a lack of recruitment of school leaders from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and partly to a lack of adequate support and professional development in multi-cultural leadership for serving principals. In addressing such challenges in the US, Johnson (2003) developed a leadership framework for building a whole-school approach to diversity, based on strategies in the five key areas of: school management; teacher in-service training and development; curriculum and instruction; building partnerships with parents; and pastoral care and student development.

The gap in training provision in the US prompted the launch of a four-year (principal) Leadership for Diversity Project in the mid-1990s (Henze et al, 2002). The research was undertaken in 21 case study schools across the US with ethnically diverse student

populations. From this research, a leadership framework for developing positive inter-ethnic relations was developed. Drawing data from this research base, Norte (1999) isolated five distinct categories of intervention used by effective principals in multi-cultural schools:

- *Content*: vision, mission statements aimed at promoting social justice and cross-cultural understanding, and how these are manifested in the school curriculum

- *Process*: how people put the content into practice through collaborative working and participation between teachers, parents, students and the wider community

- *Structure*: the configurations of time, space and people to facilitate the processes, eg by way of organised meetings and the creation of cross-cultural groups

- *Staffing*: generating understanding and cultivating positive staff attitudes through recruitment strategies and staff development programmes

- *Infrastructure*: the physical setting, ensuring accessibility and the creation of a safe, comfortable environment

Leadership development in Singapore has for some time attempted to recognise cultural sensitivity and the link between school capacity and broader multi-cultural policy. Recent developments in continental Europe have included the Intercultural Education Project initiated by the Dutch government in 1994 (Leeman, 2003). Over a four-year period, the outcomes of this programme drew attention to *direct* leadership strategies that can be taken to manage diversity, including a revision of the curriculum and teaching strategies to reflect the needs of a multi-cultural student population. However, attention was also drawn to equally important *indirect* approaches designed to promote a positive school climate and culture, including the creation of a safe and democratic school environment, opportunities for inter-ethnic contact and co-operative learning groups, and a clear repudiation of bullying or any form of discrimination (Dimmock & Walker, in press).

Ideas and strategies generated internationally may provide useful insights for facing the challenge of creating a professional learning framework for leaders of multi-cultural schools. Those developed to date appear to have considerable legitimacy not only because they are research-based, but also because they draw on the insights of experienced and highly successful school leaders. In line with present thinking in the field in Britain, recent international approaches decry prescriptive solutions to complex problems and emphasise the importance of school context and the necessity for professional dialogue, support and networking.

However, as Leeman (2003) explains, the challenges of instituting such thinking are multi-faceted. Discussing the situation in the Netherlands, Leeman explains that now that the Intercultural Education Project is completed, it struggles to sustain its efficacy within the devolved framework of school-based management. The Project's future is somewhat uncertain for two main reasons. First, from the perspective of popular support, multi-culturalism continues to be seen as a low priority; second, from an internal school perspective, moral tasks (including inter-cultural education) are seen as less pressing and urgent than satisfying school improvement targets (Leeman, 2003, p 36). The headteachers in this study expressed exactly the same concerns, and so face very similar challenges.

The challenge to improve learning for teachers and leaders in multi-cultural schools is not only a system responsibility, but one which must also be addressed by headteachers and their staff. This appears to be borne out by major movements in the US, and to a lesser extent Australia (Su, Gamage & Mininberg, 2003). The bottom line may well be that if heads

do not demand changes in present opportunities, and express what these should entail, it is unlikely that the challenge will be met.

The challenges noted in this section only touch the surface of the issues leaders of multi-ethnic schools face. They are, however, important challenges and reflect the complexity of their jobs.

Conclusion

Despite facing considerable and often convoluted challenges, the headteachers involved in the study approached their job in a positive and proactive manner. Their actions were firmly grounded in strong personal values focused on social justice issues such as racism and inter-ethnic tension. They saw a strong link between the social disadvantage associated with ethnicity, and believed issues such as racism and academic achievement were irrefutably interrelated. Based on their values and propensity toward action, the heads shared a core set of at least six priorities. These targeted the inculcation of a set of values and beliefs, involving ethnic minorities in the school in a multitude of ways and building an inclusive school culture. The priorities were put into operation by a wide-ranging collection of formal, positional and informal strategies and tactics. These varied between heads, depending on the ethnic and other contexts of their school communities. Within schools, however, strategies were generally coherent, and avoided what Henze (2000) calls a 'hodgepodge of unrelated approaches' and aimed to meld activities into a total effect that exceeded the sum of their parts. Despite the concerted attempts to address disadvantage and its influence on schools, the headteachers faced, and indeed continue to do so, an array of intricate challenges that can shift and change form depending on the availability of human resources, demands of government policy and a range of social factors. Among the more stubborn challenges are how to understand and then address the influence of culture on learning. Tailoring curriculum and teaching approaches to the needs of the students is a major hurdle which needs to be overcome. Another challenge is acquiring the learning opportunities needed to drive success in multi-ethnic schools.

Each headteacher stressed that there is no simple recipe for successfully leading a multi-ethnic school, and that each must operate in a different context, which may either support or hamper the development of the school achievement and more positive race relations. The headteachers worked in circumstances that both excited and frustrated them. Their aim was to advance the school and redress the disadvantage associated with ethnicity and class, and, in the process, improve the lot and place of their students in an uncertain future.

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