

Decision-making by school principals: The impact of ethnocultural diversity

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Introduction

In these early years of the 21st century, large scale human migrations are a global phenomenon. This massive relocation is both optional (e.g., people seeking economic advantage) and forced (e.g., as a result of conflict or environmental degradation). Many of these migrating populations seek to develop a new life in the robust economies of “the west”, a region broadly defined for the purposes of this article as the liberal democracies of countries within Europe, North America, and Oceania. Many of these countries have a colonial history emanating from the British Isles and are therefore sometimes referred to as “Anglo-Celtic” societies.

As a result of these migrations, contemporary societies are becoming more diverse and multi-ethnic in nature, especially in the urban environments of the larger cities. These changing demographics are especially apparent at the school level and are having a major impact on the work of educators, particularly those in formal leadership positions within the school. Dimmock and Walker (2005) have argued that “leadership studies are needed that identify the particularity and diversity of cultural and contextual conditions within which leadership takes place” (p. 2). In this paper we make a contribution to this plea as well as to a better understanding of some of the knowledge and skills of principals “attuned to ethnicity and multiculturalism” (p. 4).

Here we report the results of a study that sought to identify issues relating to the impact on principals’ decision-making of this increasing ethnocultural diversity in schools. The research explored the perceptions of high (or secondary) school principals from three different sub-national jurisdictions in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, each of which is receiving new citizens from a variety of different countries.

The context of the research is provided by looking briefly at the ethnocultural diversity of the three nations and the cities in which the research was conducted. Some of the relevant literature is examined, followed by a discussion of the research methodology. The findings from the study are then presented with two main themes identified as arising across the three research locations. The first of these concerns similarities in the ethnocultural diversity evident in contemporary high schools in all three of the locations studied and how principals identified the effect of such diversity on their school. The second identifies a number of similarities as to how principals from these three

ethnoculturally diverse locations perceived and managed their decision-making processes. Finally implications and conclusions drawn from the research are then presented, together with suggestions for further research in this domain.

Literature review and theoretical framework

The study drew on the concepts of ethnocultural diversity and decision-making to frame the research. Au (1995) defines ethnicity as referring to “groups with shared histories and cultural knowledge” (p. 85). It follows, then, that multi-ethnic schools may well be those containing varied and multiple groups of recognizably differing ‘cultures’. Haidt, Rosenberg and Hom (2003) assert that there are multiple domains of diversity. Goddard (1997) describes these as language, socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, culture, heritage, gender, and sexual orientation, among others, which are collectively grouped under the term “ethnocultural.”

In anthropological contexts, the term culture is “often used to apply to the totality encompassing social and cultural life” of a people (Featherstone, 1997, pp. 136-137). While the term ‘culture’ is acknowledged to be highly contested (Billot, 2005; Dimmock & Walker, 1998, 2005; Featherstone, 1997), it is generally accepted that it refers to a collectively agreed upon set of meanings for various individual actions and patterns of behaviour systems. ‘Culture’ refers to the “whole way of life of members of a society or group ... [and] is the ‘glue’ that binds people together” in a way that makes a group distinguishable from other groups (Dimmock & Walker, 2005, pp. 7-8). When actions, behaviours and beliefs are collectively agreed upon, and when the language – whether verbal, written, or displayed – used to describe these holds the same meaning for all members of a community, then a culture can be identified. In this manner one group can be distinguished from another, resonating with Hofstede’s (1991) interpretations of culture which infer that “culture is learned rather than inherited” (Dimmock & Walker, 2000, p. 308).

In organizations (including schools), however, the notion of culture is much less robust. It is difficult to talk of *the* culture of a school, for example, because we may potentially be describing a myriad of shared actions, behaviours, beliefs, norms, and understandings held by the collective of students, parents and staff of that particular school community. Even so, shared understandings of ‘the agreed upon’ culture of the

school may well be at variance from those of individual students (and their parents) whose ethnocultural profiles may be quite diverse. Further, the culture of the school may serve to distance the students and staff from parents, from community members, and from others. Dimmock and Walker (2005) talk about “multi-ethnic” schools “to describe a school whose student/staff profile has more than one race represented” (p. 9) – this is the case in all the schools involved in this study.

Starratt (2005), in describing the ‘ethics of authenticity’, observes that moral agents inhabit numerous worlds, including the interpersonal, intrapersonal, natural, socio-political, cultural, and so forth. It is these various and inter-related individual worlds, acting in concert with the similarly constructed individual worlds of others, which contribute to the understanding of culture that is developed in a particular school. Further, we must locate this culture both within the local community served by the school and also within the broader context of the society in which it is located (Goddard, 2001). It is in this crucible of diversity that school leaders continuously engage in making decisions that are underpinned by the ethical positioning of themselves, their schools and their communities.

While the term ‘diversity’ is frequently celebrated as a modern social concept, there are multiple complexities associated with attempting to define and theorise it. Despite this, *ethnic* diversity is a phenomenon that is increasingly obvious in many countries as a result of global migrations and is now having an influence on many aspects of schools, including their leadership and management (Haidt, et al., 2003). Not surprisingly, the increase in ethnocultural diversity in schools is creating new challenges (Holloway, 2003). This raises an interest in seeking to better understand educational leadership as it is evident in ethnoculturally diverse contexts.

Purpose and context of the study

The purpose of the study was to investigate the decision-making challenges faced by principals working in ethnoculturally diverse schools. The objective was to compare stories provided by principals across a tri-national context. In short, the research sought to illuminate our understandings of leadership in a context of the changing face of schools in this early part of the new century. The findings illuminated the complexity of

how principals identify, respond to and resolve issues and demonstrate effective proactive agency.

The research was conducted in the three similarly-sized cities of Auckland (New Zealand) – 1.3 million people, Calgary (Canada) – 1 million people, and Brisbane (Australia) – 1.6 million. The cities are not deemed to be nationally representative but act as an urban context for the selected high schools. Although indigenous peoples (Aboriginal peoples in Australia, First Nations in Canada, Maori in New Zealand) and English speakers were the majority in all three cities, significant numbers of other languages were present.

New Zealand. The 2001 census indicates a changing ethnic and cultural demographic, with about one sixth of the population being born overseas. The total population stands at over 3.7 million (Statistics New Zealand, 2002) with 83% of the total being of European ethnicity. While this percentage is declining, those identifying as Maori and or Pacific peoples is on the rise. Numbers of people of Asian ethnicity have more than doubled, in the recent decade, to 1 in 15 according to the 2001 census. New Zealand society is transforming to become increasingly diverse. This is very noticeable in Auckland where 1 in 8 people are of Asian ethnicity, 1 in 8 are of Pacific peoples ethnicity and 1 in 10 of Maori ethnicity (Statistics New Zealand, 2002). In addition, two thirds of those of Pacific ethnicity and, similarly, two thirds of those of Asian ethnicity live in the Auckland region. This ethnic diversity is reflected in the number of multilingual people which has also increased, to 1 in 6 persons (an increase of 20% from the previous, 1996, census).

Australia. The population of Australia at present is about 20.5 million people, with some 400,000 identified as being of Indigenous (Aboriginal or Torres Strait) origin (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005). Multiculturalism is a declared strategy for all Australians. Brisbane is the capital city of Queensland, the third largest state in the country and a dynamic and diverse society with a great variety of cultures, languages and religions. The population of Brisbane is culturally diverse. Currently over twenty-six percent of Brisbane's population was born overseas. In 1996 over fifteen percent of the population spoke a language other than English at home, with Chinese, Italian and Greek the next most common languages spoken. In addition to the rich cultural mix of society gained through immigration, Queensland recognises the unique status of Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander people as the original owners and custodians of Australian lands and waters (Office of Economic and Statistical Research, 2005).

Canada. Canada has a long tradition of being an ethnoculturally diverse country. Founded on the three realities of the Aboriginal (First Nations), English, and French societies, nation building took place by attracting many migrants from foreign lands. This tradition has continued for over a hundred years, with Winchester (2005) reporting that Canada “has a higher ratio of immigrants to native born of any country on earth. ... Many schools in Canada have children from over 50 countries, some from over 100” (p. 3). According to the 2001 national census, 18 per cent of the total Canadian population were new immigrants and a further three per cent claimed Aboriginal identity (Canada Heritage, 2003). Canada receives, on average, 225,000 new immigrants of all ages each year, with the majority relocating to urban centres (Qadeer, 2003). Due to a robust provincial economy, Calgary has also become the preferred secondary destination for many who first settle in a different part of Canada and, as a result, one in five of the population of the city is foreign born. Approximately two per cent of the population identify as aboriginal. Nearly twenty percent consider themselves to be members of a visible minority group, the majority of these Asian, the remainder identifying with a multitude of ethnocultural backgrounds. Almost twenty percent declare a language other than English or French as their mother tongue. In short, Calgary is a city of great ethnocultural diversity, and this fact is mirrored in the schools that serve the community.

Summary

In reviewing the ethnocultural profile of the populations of the three cities in which the research was conducted, it is clear that they can appropriately be considered to comprise quite diverse mixes of people of ethnic backgrounds, a mix which has both increased in diversity and number across the last decade or so. While Caucasian numbers remain dominant, each city has a presence of indigenous people and increasing numbers of immigrants, from both Anglo-Celtic countries as well many and varied European, Asian and African countries. Certainly, the student ethnocultural profile of most schools in the three cities would now be significantly different from that evident a quarter of century ago. Indeed, for many schools, this profile change would be marked across the last decade or five year period.

Research Methodology

Given the complexity of the issues to be investigated in this study, it was agreed that a qualitative approach was most appropriate. In so far as we were interested in the ‘real world’ experiences and stories of principals, the obvious settings for data collection were in schools themselves, with principals the appropriate data sources. In short, we were interested in research products that were “richly descriptive” with “words ... rather than numbers ... used to convey what the researcher has learned about a phenomenon” (Merriman, 1998, p. 8).

Using the three cities of Auckland, Brisbane and Calgary as the urban contexts, schools were selected in each location and semi-structured in-depth interviews of the principals were identified as the most appropriate data collection tool. At the outset, the research team did not define sample criteria for the whole study. Instead, each researcher selected their own sample of schools, drawing from their experience and knowledge within their own educational sector. Three complementary processes were used. In the first instance, the researcher used his or her personal knowledge to draw up a list of possible schools for involvement. To ensure the schools identified were still of a significant ethnocultural mix of student population, the various school websites were reviewed. As a result the list was reduced and then a senior officer in each jurisdiction was asked to comment on the schools with respect to their ethnocultural diversity. The list was reduced again and principals invited to participate. In all three settings, principals only declined to participate due to either illness or, in one case, a new principal felt he was not sufficiently aware of the community to be able to comment.

In order to keep the data collection process comparable yet flexible across the three locations, the focus for interviews was identified and a convergent interviewing method utilised (Dick, 1990). Interviews were conducted with fourteen [NZ 5, Australia 5, Canada 4] principals, with the project design focusing on collecting qualitative information about principals’ attitudes and perceptions on dealing with issues of diversity among the student population. The semi-structured interviews contained a predetermined set of questions in the form of an *aide memoir* (Freebody, 2004), but allowed some latitude to accommodate responses from principals – that is, to the “situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriman,

1998, p. 74). This allowed the researchers to capture the complexities of decision-making cases discussed with principals.

The convergent interview process allowed a refinement of our understanding of concepts. In this process, convergence occurs both within each interview and over the series of interviews (Dick, 1990). It was through early tentative interpretation from each successive interview, that the questions asked became more specific and the issues under investigation gained clearer meaning. Essentially, the researchers refined the questions after each interview to *converge* on the issues in a topic area; there was continuous refinement of both method and content (Carson, Gilmore, Perry & Gronhaug, 2001).

Dick (1990) refers to the strength of this method as being the combination of a structured research process with rigorous data collection and analysis, the use of interviews in a way that permits increased structuring of questions, and the dialectical process, where convergence and divergence of views is examined after each interview as explanations emerge from the data. This process of convergence is flexible and allows refinement of a “project’s focus in its early stages, by talking with knowledgeable people” (Carson et al., 2001, p. 86).

Interviews were taped with the permission of participants with transcripts or summaries returned to them for their approval. Participants were assured that no names of individuals or their schools would appear in any reporting of the study’s findings. They were also informed they would receive copies of any published materials arising from the project.

The school terms in the three locations are not synchronized, so data collection did not occur simultaneously. This was not been problematic as the data collection continued across six months, accommodating the various school term differences. In addition, it allowed the researchers to share emerging findings across the three countries.

Identification and brief profile of schools

The schools were selected independently within each location.

New Zealand. The first two schools were selected based on their obvious ethnic diversity and the way in which each school presented to its stakeholders that particular characteristic as significant for the school community, through its website and other promotional material. Subsequent schools were identified through a snowballing

technique (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The initial interviews were conducted with principals of large (over 2000 students) secondary schools and then subsequent interviews were held following referrals by interviewed participants. The selected five schools, while different in many other respects, all had ethnoculturally diverse school populations with predominantly European (Pakeha) students, but with a significant proportion of the remainder being Maori, Pacific Island and Chinese.

Australia. The five schools all exhibited considerable diversity in student profile. One had 450 students of whom twenty-five percent of students with refugee backgrounds (mainly Sudanese) and a second, of 500 students, had a large Samoan population. Those of Anglo-Celtic background were described by the principal as the “white under class”. The third school of 1300 students had 59 languages other than English spoken at home. The fourth school catered for adults as well as adolescents, with a significant refugee population as well as Aboriginal and Torres Strait students. Street-kids and impoverished young adults also attended the school. The final school also had many refugees (mainly African) as well as students from Samoa, Pacifika and the Baltic states.

Canada. The four schools were all about the same size – each enrolled between 750 and 1000 pupils – and exhibited different degrees of cultural diversity. Two had obviously high levels of cultural diversity, with visible minority students drawn from all over the world. The other two had less visible but equally significant levels of diversity among the student population. As ethnocultural diversity is a product of more than simply language and race, it was felt appropriate to include schools that represented the less visible elements of diversity.

Findings and Discussion

In this section of the paper, two intersecting themes are identified and discussed. Firstly, it was apparent that ethnocultural diversity, in all locations, is a reality of contemporary high schools and, secondly, there appeared to be similarities in how principals perceived the effect of such diversity on their decision-making processes. A comparison among the three research locations provides insight into today’s challenging context for school leadership and the findings highlighted the influence of context on principals’ ways of working. Notably, principals also had a strong influence on their context, mainly through the organizational culture they developed in their schools.

Individual experience, the specific nature of the school and its ethnocultural profile affected the style and *modus operandi* of each principal. The community in which each school was positioned also impacted on these, as well as on the resultant school organisational culture.

Ethnocultural diversity

Within the three different samples of schools, principals proffered differences of opinion as to what constitutes ‘diversity’. Interpretations of diversity in New Zealand varied and reflect an acknowledgement of the changing school communities through increasing differences between socio-economic levels, language, ethnicity, physical and intellectual abilities and disabilities, and religious and cultural affiliations. This appreciation can be summarized through these comments:

When I think of diversity the only one that comes to me is cultural because you see it. But you’ve got diversity based on the backgrounds, the socioeconomic background of the person. You walk around and see diversity around you in terms of the kids who get involved, kids who don’t, kids who are good at sports, kids who are not, kids who enjoy debating and chess and kids who don’t (George).

Whilst all the principals in the sample acknowledged diversity of many types in their schools, they were able to distinguish *ethnocultural* diversity as having noticeably increased with the rise in immigration to New Zealand from other countries. Diana noticed that students immigrating from countries in the Middle East and Africa have selected her school as one that caters for culturally diverse students even though attendance involves significant travel from outer suburbs. “I know that we celebrate (diversity) all the time. We (also) have an international week focused on celebrating diversity.... enabling the students to feel proud about who they are”.

Most of the Brisbane principals considered the notion of “diversity” as embracing a very wide range of characteristics of students, including those recently arrived in the country from ethnoculturally diverse backgrounds (e.g. refugees from African states), those of indigenous backgrounds, and those who had recently returned to school as adults after poor schooling experiences as young people. For this latter group, one principal observed that his school “gives them a second chance”, noting the school was “not a traditional school ... in a sense it attracts different students because of this”.

In Canada, all four principals observed that diversity among students was not restricted to issues of colour or language. Paul commented that “the school has a reasonable amount of diversity in actual fact. ... We have a significant number of children who come from all over the world, [and] the students from a variety of socioeconomic situations which leads to a huge diversity in the school”. When asked how he understood and defined diversity, Simon said:

Well, I guess it goes through a lot of various things. We have got quite some students in special education programs for whatever reasons, they are right from gifted to highly medium. The diversity of values and morals was in the same ethnic group, certainly the different ethnic groups themselves. So diversity, I guess is a pretty wide range that, to be the diversity between you and me, I would define it quite broadly.

Jan explained that her school “had a huge range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds.” She estimated that 10 per cent of her students were recent immigrants to Canada, from a range of countries. She also observed that almost 12 per cent of her students were of Aboriginal (First Nations or Métis) background, and that in her school “there is a wide enough range of diversity so that nobody stands out.” In contrast, Heather defined diversity as:

I would define it is a couple of individuality and differences, kind of many factors that make a place diverse. You will see very urban looking kids in clothing, you will see our cowboys, you will see our gothic element, all of the cliques, those types of things. So there is diversity in the school and kids will comment on it here as the different groups that exist. They define their own groups that they belong to.

It is apparent that in the Canadian context ethnocultural diversity is viewed quite broadly, and incorporates dimensions such as socioeconomic class, intellectual ability, and rural versus urban background, as well as race, language, and culture. The inclusive nature of the concept among Canadian educators perhaps stems from the fact that Canada is an avowedly ‘multicultural’ nation, with federal legislation stating that

the Government of Canada recognizes the diversity of Canadians as regards race, national or ethnic origin, colour and religion as a fundamental characteristic of

Canadian society and is committed to a policy of multiculturalism designed to preserve and enhance the multicultural heritage of Canadians while working to achieve the equality of all Canadians in the economic, social, cultural and political life of Canada. (Government of Canada, 1985)

For two decades Canada has celebrated diversity as something which permits the individuality of each person or groups of people within the broader notion of a unifying nation.

Summary. As researchers visiting schools such as those in this study, it was not hard to “see” the diversity among the student population as one walked around the schools. The physical, cultural and ethnic differences were tangible. The artifacts and symbols permeating many of these schools, and highlighted prominently on some schools’ websites, was one of a different reality and culture from what one would have expected in these same schools probably just a decade ago. For all of the principals, these differences were seen as strengths to be celebrated.

Managing ethnocultural diversity

Whilst diversity in school appears to have a multitude of meanings, the principals referred to the impact of changing student *ethnocultural* characteristics on their schools. Principals in all three locations recognised that ethnocultural diversity was a significant factor in how their school’s identity was perceived and managed, which inevitably affected relationships with community stakeholders and required positive interactions within the school community. This impacted on the way the principals lead their schools.

In New Zealand, the five principals spoke of their approaches to celebrate their school’s diversity. All five schools integrated ethnocultural celebrations into their school programmes, varying from a cultural week with dance, food and performance through to costume days and having flags of every nation represented in the school (in one school 58 flags were purchased for the school hall). Each school developed its own approach to creating a community that integrated its diverse student body, although Murray did not believe that there is one simple model for achieving that.

What I believe is that there has to be coherence and a strong ethos that binds it together and it can happen, different kinds of glue can do that. I am always thinking about what we can do and what are the neat things we can do to build the

community, rather than thinking in terms of problems of groups. We celebrate difference but work as a family.

Michael initiated a study in his school specifically focusing on the issue of diversity in the multicultural school. Whilst recognizing many definitions, for the purpose of his report diversity was defined in ethnic terms. The study that led to the report aimed at identifying and addressing the needs of the students in the school. The creation of a staff committee to deal with new students was but one strategy that this school used to address particular student needs.

In all five of the New Zealand interviews, the principals acknowledged the significance of ethnic diversity in their schools, and the concomitant need for an inclusive school culture. One principal pointed to an acknowledgement of diversity within the school as being part of their mission statement stating that “we feel as if we are probably one of the most ethnically diverse schools there is.” Another spoke of recruiting ethnically diverse staff to meet the needs of the diverse student body. “One I’ve just employed, chose (this school) because of the diversity, the cultural differences here.”

Whilst diversity of all types was seen as an integral part of their school communities, none of the principals believed that ethnocultural diversity caused them insurmountable problems. All principals led their schools in ways that celebrated the particular school identity, such as by making sure that “each one gets their time in the sun” through cultural celebrations or programme initiatives. One school website articulates its values statement openly to include the “support of the multi-cultural and diverse nature of its community” while another includes an acknowledgement of the importance of diversity in the school mission statement. Murray declared that he actively chose to “work in multi ethnic, diverse environments, because that’s where I enjoy being”. Murray also spoke of his belief that many schools

celebrate differences in a way that exacerbates problems. We’ve celebrated differences that shatter communities rather than bring it together because we’ve celebrated the difference but not the unity. So we try to make sure every single group in the school is enmeshed in the (school) culture and made to feel part of things.

In effect, all five interviewees in New Zealand asserted that diverse ethnocultural characteristics were just that, characteristics and not problems. Diana summed this up in her explanation of her school's culture as having "an ethic of inclusion". The five principals were vigorously enthusiastic about their positive school cultures, endeavouring to develop a community that celebrates, rather than highlights, the ethnocultural difference.

From the brief descriptions provided earlier, it is clear that the five schools located in Brisbane present ethnoculturally diverse student profiles. Indeed, as for some of the Canadian schools, diversity was also evident in other ways, such as socio-economic and ability profiles. What is significant among all five principals interviewed is that, like their New Zealand counterparts, they did not see the diversity of their school, the ethnocultural diversity in particular, as a disadvantage or a problem. Rather it simply represented one characteristic, albeit an important one, of their school. Indeed, for four of the principals, it was to be celebrated and seen as a strength on which to build their schools. Mark indicated that to be successful in schools with ethnocultural student profiles, one needed to be able to learn and work cross-culturally – this involves being committed to a two-way strong concept where one is strong in their own/home culture and strong in the mainstream culture. On a practical level, Kathy indicated she was able to monitor what was happening in the school across the different cultural groups through her "cultural captains", students nominated by students who kept her informed of what was happening with particular ethnic groups, particularly when trouble might be developing.

All of the schools had in-school language support units for students whose first (or home) language was other than English. Kathy noted that the ethnic diversity in her school could be somewhat problematic in response to world events, such as bombings and terrorist acts in some of the students' home countries. Tensions among different ethnic groups sometimes resulted but overall, the school made every effort for different student groups not to stand out, but tried to make sure "they are integrated into the school while retaining their ethnic differences". She noted, as did other principals that some of the students, the refugees in particular, had experienced terrible traumas in their past. So much so, that for some students, punishment imposed in this Australian school was not seen to be a very serious matter compared with the very negative experiences confronted

earlier in life. Valerie noted that teachers needed to be alert to trauma cases and that quite unexpected things can “set students off” because of their past.

Kathy noted two challenges arising from the diversity in the school. The first related to the fact that she was female. Her gender was a “problem with some groups, such that they won’t shake my hand”. The other issue related to fact that some staff were not willing to accept the different groups and their customs, with some wanting to “go back to the good old days with wealthy Chinese students and locals”. However, one principal had taken on a number of staff who were also migrants and had experienced, at least in part, similar things to the students. This help to create an understanding and supportive environment in the school. This second point raises a critical issue about the culture developed in the schools, and led by the principals, that leads to an inclusive and supportive ethos. All principals demonstrated through their comments that they were committed to social justice principles. It was these principles that drove their focus on all students in their schools. Barry, for example, expressed strong acceptance of, and support for, “different students”, so much so that he felt the school “attracted different students”. He noted that “if we are not successful with them, what happens to them?”

In the Canadian schools there was a sense that the visible face of diversity was increasing on a weekly basis. Three of the four principals noted that by watching the television news they could predict the waves of new children who would soon be arriving at their doors. Most recently they had welcomed children from Afghanistan, Sudan, Haiti, and Iraq, and each new set resulted in new challenges to be managed. Like their counterparts in Auckland and Brisbane, these challenges were not perceived as problematic, simply as a reality of life in the 21st century.

Although there was some evidence of the celebrations of diversity reported by the New Zealand principals, the Canadians did not see the highlighting of diversity as being crucial to their work. Rather, they felt it was more important to assist students and teachers to recognize the beliefs and values of each ethnocultural group and to encourage acceptance of all these worldviews. To that end, the identification of specific heritage celebrations was rarely encouraged. Although there was some acknowledgement of major festivals such as Easter, Diwali, Eid-al-Fitr, the Chinese New Year, and so forth, all four principals felt that celebrating the three F’s of multiculturalism – food, festivals and folk

dancing – did not really allow the development of a deep understanding of ‘other’ in relation to the dominant society.

The Canadian schools did not enroll the large number of fee-paying international students indicated from their New Zealand counterparts. Although there are some international students in Calgary schools, this is not a major sub-culture within the education system. More normally, the international students who registered in these schools were new immigrants to Canada. These young people shared with some second generation students, and with some Aboriginal youth, a lack of understanding of the English language. As a result they were often enrolled in ESL classes and, indeed, this variable (requirement for ESL support) appears to have become a proxy marker for “diversity and difference” within the formal school reporting process.

This focus on language is, perhaps, one of the reasons that all four Calgary area principals stressed the need for school administrators to understand the nuances of communication. As Jan said: “It [communication] is a two way process, with many unanticipated barriers and influences between the sender and the receiver. As a principal it is really important that you don’t react immediately to what seems like an inappropriate comment – first figure out what the kid was trying to say!” As a corollary of this, Paul commented that often teachers need to be reminded that ESL students can appear to be rude or insubordinate when really it’s simply a lack of understanding of cultural boundaries concerning communication protocols.

Another challenge identified by the Canadian principals was the need to be aware of post-traumatic stress reactions that were triggered by seemingly innocuous events. Heather noted that “we all think the kids from some war-torn place might be antsy about a policeman coming in to the classroom, but it’s the things you don’t anticipate that get you.” She went on to describe a situation where a child from Somalia flew into a violent rage during a gym class, apparently because the sound made by a ball hitting another student reminded him of an event he had witnessed. Heather also observed that one of the key roles of the principal in an ethnoculturally diverse school was to ensure that the teachers were not only aware of these possibilities, but were alert to them as well.

As with the Australian principals described above, the Canadians all exhibited a firm belief in the principles of equity and social justice. Further, their practice was informed,

in an intentional way, by those beliefs. That said, there did not seem to be the same focus on difference as was reported from the Australian and New Zealand schools. There was a recognition of diversity, but also a sense that this diversity was simply individual expressions within a coherent whole. It may be that the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (Government of Canada, 1985) has become such a part of how Canadians identify themselves that difference, while recognized, is not emphasized so much as integration, of maintaining ones diversity while becoming part of the wider societal body politic. Such integration is not, it must be stressed, viewed as an assimilationist process where individual difference is blended to a composite neutrality; rather, the idiosyncracies of identity – both individual and collective – are preserved and nurtured within a common weal.

Conclusions and implications

This paper has outlined a tri-nation study of school leadership in schools of ethnocultural diversity. This study was initiated to broaden the focus of research into educational leadership and place it firmly in a dynamic global and social context. Dimmock and Walker (2000) believe that “a key direction for educational management and leadership in the twenty first century is to embrace an international, cultural and cross-cultural comparative perspective” (p. 306). The three selected contexts of Auckland, Brisbane and Calgary provide a glimpse into how nations that appear to have dissimilar characteristics and contrasting educational systems nonetheless show similarities in the way principals lead ethnoculturally diverse schools. The resultant individual school culture is one that emerges from context-appropriate guidance and leadership.

In this study it was found that the principals acknowledged varied forms of diversity, from ethnic, cultural, religious and socio-economic background, to diversity of learning needs and abilities. The focus on ethnocultural diversity was, for some, arbitrary, as the principals perceived this as only one dimension of the whole school community. Despite that viewpoint, they acknowledged that student differences arising from ethnic and cultural backgrounds contributed significantly to the identity of their schools. For this reason, the school’s uniqueness became a reflection of the ethnocultural mix and the character of the school encompassed that.

The principals approached the issues arising from diversity as just one facet of the evolving school culture. In many cases it was their confident leadership and role modeling that developed an environment of trust, whereby problematic issues were resolved through the distribution of responsibility within the management structures. We could not be anything but impressed by the commitment and the particularised decision-making that these individual principals demonstrated in their school contexts.

One interesting observation in all three jurisdictions was the capacity of the principals interviewed to lead and manage highly challenging and complex organizations. None of the principals demonstrated any real anxiety or concern in dealing effectively with this complexity. Their strong social justice orientations and their capacity to build effective relationships across all members of their communities seemed to be a strong mitigating factor in managing what, for many, would present as significant challenges. It has been noted that continual and increasing immigration is putting pressure on school communities both in terms of resourcing and changing characteristics of the school community. In such a context it is imperative that schools recognize the differing needs and goals of students and respond to this diversity (Ministry of Education, 2003). So while school principals in this study exemplify positive models for leading diverse schools, it is acknowledged that educational groups of students are 'characterized by diversity or heterogeneity' and that quality teaching for heterogeneous groups remains a challenge for teachers (Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 5).

These matters raise some significant policy issues for consideration. There are two key challenges for education systems and for individual schools regarding the principalship of such schools. The first relates to the recruitment and selection of principals to lead ethnoculturally diverse schools. There is no doubt that such schools require leaders with special capabilities; it is also emerging from our research that strongly articulated notions of social justice may also be crucial to success. The second challenge is to ensure that adequate professional development opportunities are provided for those aspiring to lead in these schools. This may include formal programmes, but perhaps more importantly, mentoring and work shadowing of effective principals in these schools might provide critical learning opportunities for those aspirants.

Madsen and Mabokela (2002) have reflected on the critical need to accept that with increased global mobility the demographics of societies are changing, school leadership roles are becoming more pluralistic, and schools face “critical adaptive challenges” (p. 1). This necessitates a change of emphasis to acknowledging and managing all types of individuals and groups and their differences, for “pluralistic leadership assumes that acceptance can be reached by understanding, valuing and utilizing the differences between groups” (Avenall, 2004, p. 2). Banks refers to this as the consequence of “racial, ethnic, cultural and language diversity (which) is increasing in nation-states throughout the world because of worldwide immigration” (2004, p. 296).

In effect, increased population movements are creating increasingly diverse communities (Dimmock, Shah & Stevenson, 2004), in which schools are enriched by the diversity of cultures and can offer many different opportunities (Escobar-Ortloff & Ortloff, 2003). At the same time, school leaders need to “understand the characteristics and expectations of the different cultural groups within the school community” and develop “a proactive strategy to address any potential ‘cultural’ conflicts and misunderstandings that might arise” (p. 255).

There is increasing academic interest in the context of school leaders and how principals manage the issues which confront them daily. This study has highlighted how “increasingly diverse student populations challenge principals to examine not whether but how they will respond to students needs” (Merchant, 1999, p.165). It is apparent that the impact of diversity in schools on creating issues for school leaders needs to be researched, for principals need to be more than competent to deal with the demands of individualized contexts.

This research study was undertaken in three cities, of roughly similar size and demographic diversity, across the three countries of New Zealand, Canada and Australia. The findings provide some empirical evidence of the need to articulate diversity of leadership in context. The study explored leadership issues that arise as a result of changing global demographics and revealed the complex nature of researching school leadership. However it is to be noted that these findings may not be representative but simply reflect the nature of the principals who engaged in the study.

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