

The Teacher and Student Diversity : Problems, Challenges and Opportunities

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Two recent surveys of teachers in New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria identified 'catering for the diverse range of students' needs' as the major professional challenge facing teachers in their day-to-day work (Smith, 1996, p.13). This finding is noteworthy, as concern for the effects of student diversity was so great that it was ranked in these surveys of teacher concerns ahead of issues such as discipline and violence in schools, factors which have in the past consistently been reported as the number one difficulty facing teachers.

In a paper entitled 'Visions of the Future: The School in the Year 2007', school principal Paul Kilvert echoed the concerns of teachers, singling out the increasing diversity of the student population as one of the most significant changes facing Australian schools now and over the next decade. The task confronting educators is a daunting one, according to Kilvert, and to be handled appropriately requires teachers to 'recognise', 'value', and 'include' the differences between students in what is taught and how they choose to teach (Kilvert, 1997, p.59).

At about the same time, in a publication produced by the Phi Delta Kappan Foundation, Lombardi and Ludlow (1996) identified four trends which would shape the future of special education, and which most educators would now recognise as having relevance to regular education as well. These trends were (1) integration and inclusion, (2) collaboration and teaming, (3) the use of advanced technology, and (4) acceptance of diversity. There can be little argument that the first three trends are already firmly established in the way education is thought about, if not totally delivered to children with special needs, and in the way most schools are expected to operate. The last trend is more problematic. While it is true that in

recent years educational policy makers, researchers, and practitioners have begun to recognise and acknowledge the impact of an increasingly diverse student population on both curriculum design considerations and instructional practices (Churton, Cranston-Gingras & Blair, 1998; Davis, 1993; Salend, 1998), there would be little agreement that diversity has achieved the status of acceptance among educators or the community at large. Its existence remains a concern for teachers who readily acknowledge that they are ill-prepared for the many challenges involved in teaching groups of students with a wide range of academic and social characteristics (Allsopp, 1997; Schumm & Vaughn, 1992; Semmell, Abernathy, Butera & Lesar, 1991; Wilkinson, 1998).

In this paper I will explore the issue of student diversity as it relates to the difficulties and challenges it poses to the design and delivery of instruction. The paper will also look at the educational movements which advocate the benefits of diversity in both a broad social sense, and specifically in reference to its impact on the education system and teachers in particular. Throughout the discussion 'student diversity' will be used to refer to both the behavioural and psychological characteristics which contribute to individual uniqueness, and to the myriad of social and cultural differences which exist in the community at large and which are also reflected in the school population. The paper will conclude with a discussion of the impediments which exist to inhibit the capacity of teachers to respond appropriately and effectively to student diversity and diverse student needs. First, however, some of the many dimensions of population and student diversity will be reviewed to provide a context for the discussion.

Dimensions of Population and Student Diversity

In the literature on student diversity in schools, most attention has been given to the expanding number of students from racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse backgrounds (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1991). The children of migrant and refugee families, and children of the native population (where this constitutes a minority) often contribute substantially to this component of the expanding school population. In addition, in Australia, where there is a strong commitment to social justice and inclusive education, we find that regular classes contain an increasing number of children with mild to moderate disabilities.

While most attention is given to the aforementioned groups, other important factors contribute to student diversity, not the least of which are social class differences and differences in respect to home and family backgrounds. Bradsher (1995) and Schwarz (1995) have noted the widening gap between rich and poor in many countries, including highly developed countries and former European communist countries struggling to come to terms with life in the free market economy. In such environments some prosper while others find it hard to earn a living, and sink further and further into poverty. Australia is not immune to the adverse effects of dramatic economic change, and much has been said about the growing numbers of poor in this country. Kilvert reports that 'throughout Australia three quarters of a million dependent children live in households where no wages are earned' (Kilvert, 1997, p.58).

Marriage break-up is a significant fact of life in Australia today. The nuclear family (mother, father, and children) so often considered the typical (and for many, the desirable) family background for students is no longer the situation for a growing number of children and youth in schools. Many children now live in single parent families. While these occurrences do not necessarily result in adverse effects on children, they often do, as children are caught up in the emotional turmoil of parental conflict, family relocation, and financial insecurity (Amato & Keith, 1991; Amato, 1993).

Many more children than previously believed are exposed to adverse home environments where drug and alcohol abuse exist and where child abuse and neglect are an unfortunate reality. The negative effect of such conditions on the emotional well-being of children and their adjustment to school is well documented (Churton

et al., 1998). Less well known and understood is the impact on children of high levels of family mobility, homelessness, and lack of parental supervision. Researchers are only beginning to explore the adjustment problems of gay and lesbian youth (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1996), and of children and youth with HIV/AIDS (Cobia, Carney & Waggoner, 1998). And to these categories one must add the alarming number of children and youth in our schools who suffer from depression and/or who may be suicidal (Lester 1998; Levine, 1995).

Many children and youth exhibit a remarkable resiliency to the adverse conditions experienced in their home and/or community. Others are overwhelmed by these conditions and find it difficult to adjust to the expectations and demands of the school environment. Teachers are well placed to provide a supportive haven for troubled students, and the curriculum can be used to explore issues of disadvantage, poverty, prejudice and neglect, so that all children can come to understand society in its fullest sense. To do this teachers must reflect on their own perspectives, fears and values, and judge whether these may inhibit or limit their understanding and respect for all students. We know that many teachers harbour less than positive views of children from single parent families (Guttmann, Geva & Gefen, 1988), although recent research in Australia indicates that these prejudices are less evident today as rigid and conservative views of what constitutes the family are modified in the face of social change (Fields, 1993). New challenges, though, confront teachers in the 1990s as issues of sexual preference gradually, if reluctantly, are being addressed in schools (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1996). Teachers find themselves in the forefront of concerns about drug abuse, homophobia and youth suicide. Little in their professional preparation has prepared them for their role in addressing these problems. To ignore them, however, and to deny any responsibility for their management is to invite criticism for being both insensitive and irrelevant. The opportunity exists for schools to make a positive contribution to alleviating these and other social problems, but it requires of teachers a commitment to expand their already complex and demanding role.

The Impetus for Heterogeneous Classes

Two movements in particular—multicultural education and inclusive education—have been in the forefront of advocacy for the recognition and acceptance of students from diverse backgrounds in the mainstream of education. Both have had a major impact on curriculum in schools, with

demands that the school curriculum acknowledges (and indeed celebrates) diversity, and that teaching practices be responsive and adaptive to the learning and adjustment needs of children whose background and/or characteristics make them different in some way.

Both multicultural education and inclusive education have evolved into broader and more complex concepts and processes in recent times. Where once multicultural education was associated primarily with the provision of equal educational opportunities for students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, today it is viewed as incorporating a host of other differences, including race, ethnicity, religion and gender (Dean, Salend & Taylor, 1993), socioeconomic class, age and ability (York, 1991), and family lifestyle (Jones & Derman-Sparks, 1992). The strategies for achieving multicultural education are equally diverse, with proponents of the social justice, social cooperation, anti-bias, and activism approaches seeking acceptance alongside advocates of global education (Winter, 1994/95).

The evolution of inclusive education from its origins as 'integration' and 'mainstreaming' have been well documented. The terms 'integration' and 'mainstreaming' implied a focus on children who were not normally considered part of general education, nor, in some cases, part of mainstream society. Further, the processes of integration and mainstreaming placed considerable emphasis on eligibility criteria for regular class placement (Deiner, 1993). Inclusion is now viewed as a more appropriate term, as it signifies that students are embraced and accepted in regular education 'from the moment their educational careers commence' (Boscardin & Jacobson, 1997, p.466), and implies a sense of 'belonging' rather than placement, and an understanding that the curriculum of the regular class will be inclusive—that is, it will accommodate children with a wide range of individual differences (Winter, 1994/95).

Mention needs to be made of a movement (the detracking movement) which, in some respects, predates both multicultural education and inclusive education, and which also has as its focus the education of students in heterogeneous classes. Developed in response to the widespread use of tracking in schools—variously described as streaming and ability grouping—this movement set out to reverse the practice which many saw as contributing to social inequalities.

Tracking was designed ostensibly to minimise heterogeneity of learning ability (Resh & Dar, 1996), and was seen as a way of tailoring instruction to the needs of low ability, average and above average students (Gamoran, 1992). While it

is recognised that more able students often benefit from better quality, more challenging instruction in homogeneous classes; it is now widely acknowledged that students in the lower ability groups are exposed to a less varied, less challenging curriculum, and to instruction which is more focused on the maintenance of order as opposed to the achievement of academic excellence (Yair, 1997). The end result is that divisions which already exist in society, in respect of those who are advantaged and those who are disadvantaged, are reinforced in education through organisational structures which differentiate students on ability, and whether consciously or not on other characteristics as well, such as socioeconomic status and race (Abraham, 1995; Caldas & Bankston, 1998; Gamoran & Mare, 1989).

Support for Heterogeneous Classes

The creation of heterogeneous classes has been argued and supported primarily on sociopolitical rather than educational grounds. The view taken by its proponents is that as society is pluralistic in composition, schools too should mirror this diversity through organisational structures which create equally diverse class groups. In addition, a strong argument has been mounted that there should exist in our schools equality of opportunity (Oakes, 1985), and that as classes constituted on grounds such as ability or any other single variable have been shown to reinforce inequalities already present in society, such actions must be viewed as undemocratic and should be vigorously resisted (Rothenberg, McDermott & Martin, 1998).

While the effects of tracking and other forms of homogeneous grouping have been systematically studied, very little research has been conducted on the effects of heterogeneous classes to show that such classes have a positive impact on student learning and social adjustment. One recent study conducted in secondary schools where multi-level ability grouping and tracking were pervasive organisational tenets, suggests that heterogeneous classes can produce positive results when compared with the achievements of students in more traditional tracking arrangements (Rothenberg, McDermott & Martin, 1998). In this study, students in the newly formed heterogeneous classes were actually exposed to more student-centred instruction, and to teacher-student interaction where there were substantially more higher order questions asked. In addition, there was a higher level of teacher-student and student-student interaction in the heterogeneous classes, and students in these classes scored highly on measures of critical thinking and enjoyment of

the learning process. While these results are encouraging, they were obtained in the context where the heterogeneous classes all employed cooperative group learning methods. Whether the same results would have been obtained using more traditional teaching methods is open to conjecture.

Classroom Heterogeneity: The Teacher's Response

Increasing population diversity is inevitably reflected in diversity in student enrolment. Schools and classrooms are becoming more heterogeneous in their makeup, and this is necessitating a reassessment of the appropriateness of school curricula and instructional practices (Klinger, Vaughn, & Schumm, 1998). Classroom teachers are experiencing the full force of these changes in two significant respects. Not only are they needing to adjust and adapt their teaching to a more pluralistic class composition, but many are faced with personal challenges in regard to the increasing divergence between their own background (typically white, Anglo-Saxon, middle-class, and monolingual) and the backgrounds of their students (varied racial and cultural origins or backgrounds, and often socioeconomically disadvantaged) (Brownell & Walther-Thomas, 1997; Melnick & Zeichner, 1998).

Just how dramatically population diversity is impacting on classroom enrolments today is highlighted in an illustration of class heterogeneity reported by Fuchs, Fuchs, Mathes and Simmons (1997):

Now picture this: 34 children in an urban third-grade classroom, one-third of whom live in poverty. Six live with grandparents, and three are in foster care. Five come from homes in which a language other than English is spoken; two children do not speak English at all. Seven, six, five, three, two, and one are African American, Hispanic American, Korean, Russian, Haitian, and Chinese, respectively. Six are new to the school, and four will relocate to a different school next year. Only five of the 34 students are at or above grade level in reading; 10 are two or more grade levels below. There is a 5-grade spread in reading achievement. In addition, three students have been certified as learning disabled. One is severely mentally retarded, and another is deaf. According to the Department of Health and Human Services, the child with mental retardation and two other students in the class have

been physically or sexually abused. (Fuchs, et al., 1997, p.176)

The situation reported in the above example is by no means unusual; such a classroom mix of student backgrounds, characteristics and abilities is becoming very much the norm in many urban schools in many countries (Hodgkinson, 1995; Natriello, McDill & Pallas, 1990; Puma, Jones, Rock & Fernandez, 1993).

How do teachers faced with such diversity in student cultural and experiential backgrounds, and abilities, provide instruction that is responsive and adaptive to the needs of all students? Fuchs et al. (1997) believe that they cannot and that they do not. They believe that teachers make a conscious (albeit in some cases reluctant) decision to provide instruction that will be appropriate to some students, but insufficient to address the learning and adjustment needs of others. Fuchs et al. (1997) are not the only educators who hold this view. According to Gerber and Semmel (1984):

Teachers aim their instructional 'plans' at ...relatively homogeneous groups in an apparent attempt to reduce the sheer cognitive complexity of planning and instruction associated with the broad ranges of student characteristics and abilities. (Gerber & Semmel, 1984, p.141)

Teachers refer to this process as teaching to the 'middle of the class'—that is, to those students, understood to be the majority, who are perceived as capable of learning, and for whom any support given by the teacher will result in some success, and for the teacher some degree of personal satisfaction and sense of efficacy. We now know that the concept of the 'middle of the class' is fast assuming mythical proportions and is certainly not borne out by the reality of today's class enrolment patterns.

From studies of mainstreaming it is clear that many teachers 'broadly resent mandates to differentiate curriculum and instruction for a wide range of learners' (Tomlinson, Callahan, Tomchin, Eiss, Imbeau, & Landrum, 1997, p.270). And disturbingly, while they may be aware that this view might have a negative effect on the social and academic needs of many students, teachers still regard their actions as understandable and defensible. Fuchs et al. (1997) ask the question: Who are the winners and losers in this situation? Again, Gerber and Semmel (1984) provide an answer:

Classroom teachers naturally orient, both in terms of effort and positive affect, towards students whom they consider 'teachable' and away from students [who]

are...difficult-to-teach. (Gerber & Semmel, 1984, p.141)

There is a considerable body of literature showing that low-achieving students are the 'losers' (Good & Brophy, 1997). They are provided with fewer modifications to instruction than more able students (Baker & Zigmond, 1990; Durkin, 1990; Fulk & Smith, 1995; Zigmond & Baker, 1994). They receive less direct teacher instruction and supervised practice than high-achieving students (Hall, Delquadri, Greenwood & Thurston, 1982; O'Sullivan, Ysseldyke, Christenson & Thurlow, 1990). Teachers interact with low-achievers less frequently (Adams & Cohen, 1974), and low-achievers are criticised more for failure than their more accomplished classmates (Babad, Inbar & Rosenthal, 1982). As disabled students and students from minority and disadvantaged groups are disproportionately represented in the ranks of low-achieving students (Teel, Debruin-Parecki & Covington, 1998), it is not difficult to see how poorly schools and teachers are coping with the challenges presented by increasingly diverse student populations and class groups.

It needs to be acknowledged, however, that the pattern of differential treatment of less able and low-achieving students found in studies of primary and secondary schools is less evident in early education settings, where there appears to be a stronger ethos of attention to individual needs, both in the curriculum and in teaching practice. A number of studies have highlighted this difference. In comparing the instructional behaviour of Grade 4 and 5 teachers with teachers in Grade 1 and 2 classrooms, Van Scoy (1994) found that teachers of the younger students interacted more with the children and that these communications were more child-centred and explanatory. The Grade 1 and 2 teachers were also found to provide more information about expected behaviour, and placed a greater emphasis on socialising children to their role as students. In a study of 21 low socioeconomic status students in 14 kindergarten classrooms, children who had completed the Head Start program aimed at improving the academic skills of disadvantaged children, Skinner, Bryant, Coffman and Campbell (1998) found evidence of exemplary practices, including high teacher expectations for all children, an emphasis on what children could do rather than on their limitations, praise, a willingness to work with a child one-on-one, gentle redirection for inappropriate behaviour, and a caring attitude.

Even in the Skinner et al. (1998) study though, the authors observed practices that were not

exemplary and which contributed to a 'trajectory of school failure' for many students (Skinner et al., 1998, p.307). Teachers in the study complained of unrealistic expectations that they could 'stand and deliver', fix everything, and do it all without support, recognition, or monetary recompense (Skinner et al., 1998, p.307). Skinner and her colleagues described the very real dilemma facing teachers even in early childhood settings

Schools traditionally have been structured for the prototypical child, one who shares the cultural capital validated in mainstream schools (i.e., middle-class, European-American styles of communication learning, showing respect, participating in school, etc.). Most classrooms are not well prepared to deal with students who have different cultural styles, learning patterns, or whose home situation may not be beneficial to their development and well-being (e.g., situations of abuse and neglect). (Skinner et al., 1998, p.308)

We know from reactions to multicultural education that many teachers are unwilling to face the issues of cultural diversity. Brownell and Walther-Thomas (1997) report that teachers are in a state of 'denial' about imperatives to recognise and 'celebrate' cultural diversity in the curriculum and in their teaching. Erwin (1998) reports that many teachers 'handle diversity by ignoring it, teaching all children in the same way regardless of language or cultural backgrounds, or by viewing differences as "deficits" to "remediate"' (Erwin, 1998, p.323). Teachers have been criticised for their lack of sensitivity to student differences and their reticence to move beyond the largely Eurocentric curriculum which they are accustomed to, but which can act to reinforce stereotypic views of other cultures, and is thought by many to reproduce social inequalities (Teel, Debruin-Parecki & Covington, 1998).

Evidence of the practical difficulties confronting proponents of multicultural education comes from a large-scale study of teachers in middle schools in the United States (Tomlinson, Moon & Callahan, 1998). Teachers in 1,988 schools were surveyed about how they viewed the needs of middle school students (a group noted for its tremendous variation in developmental and motivational levels, and aptitude for learning), and what instructional provisions they used to cater for the differences exhibited by their students. Among other findings, Tomlinson et al. (1998) found that half of the teachers surveyed reported that they 'see no need to modify or differentiate instruction for

academically diverse learners' (Tomlinson et al. 1998, p.7). Coupled with this was the finding that few if any modifications were made based on the cultural profile of students. Indeed, the authors of the study found a strong negative reaction to suggestions that such modifications were needed; one respondent stating that 'Only when we stop adapting instruction for cultural differences will we be equal' (Tomlinson et al., 1998, p.10).

So comfortable are teachers about their view of students from diverse cultural backgrounds, and about their perspective on multicultural education, that recent union surveys in NSW and Victoria of factors contributing to teacher stress found that teachers did not rate catering for the ethnic and cultural diversity of students as a major cause of concern (Smith, 1996). These findings seem to support the view that teachers do not accept responsibility for the education of children whose ethnic or cultural background is different from the perceived Anglo-Saxon norm. By implication, there would be little motivation on the part of teachers to tailor or to adapt instruction for children outside the norm.

There is no shortage of advice and guidelines for teachers working with students from cultural and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Again, the early education sector appears to be leading the way here with the issue addressed vigorously in the professional literature (Mallory & New, 1994; Tabors, 1998), and recommendations for good practice promoted by such organisations as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1996).

Similar calls for a more appropriate response to the needs of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds have appeared in the literature on primary and secondary education, but their impact has been far less pronounced. In these sectors, efforts to secure a genuine place for multicultural education in the curriculum and more adaptive responses to the instructional needs of children from diverse backgrounds have been impeded by a cross-current of teacher concern about the effect of incremental curriculum development, and the associated increase in the difficulty level and complexity of their work. Bullough and Baughman refer to the 'endless' and 'externally driven' role expansion of teachers, and how little consideration is given to the provision of training and support of teachers, let alone a serious assessment of whether teachers can realistically be expected to embrace each and every new demand (Bullough & Baughman, 1995, p.93).

Impediments to Differentiated Instruction

In fairness to educators it needs to be acknowledged that teachers work under incredibly difficult conditions, and many aspects of their professional preparation and work environment are counterproductive to efforts to make schools more responsive and inclusive. Here, two such factors will be considered: teacher training, and the culture and organisational structure of schools.

Attention has focused in recent years on the importance of teacher education in preparing teachers to work with diverse groups of students. Melnick and Zeichner (1998) define the role of teacher education in this regard:

It is the responsibility of teacher educators to help all teachers, novice and experienced, acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and dispositions needed to work effectively with a diverse student population. (Melnick & Zeichner, 1998, p.88)

Unfortunately, teacher education institutions have fallen a long way short of meeting this expectation. The criticism of teacher educators and teacher education in general is wide ranging and includes:

- staff who are overwhelmingly Caucasian, monolingual, and culturally encapsulated (Ducharme & Agne, 1989; Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee, 1998; Villegas, 1993);
- curriculum which is largely monocultural and focused on practices which would benefit only average achieving, white, middle-class students (Goodlad, 1990);
- little serious or coordinated attempt to enhance the cultural sensitivity and the cultural experience of student teachers (Deering, 1997);
- the recruitment of predominantly white middle-class teacher trainees who have had limited interracial and intercultural experience and who, in many cases, possess erroneous assumptions about students from diverse backgrounds (Melnick & Zeichner, 1997; Zeichner, 1993; Zeichner & Melnick, 1996a);
- the graduation of teachers who have little inclination to work with students from diverse backgrounds or to work in remote rural areas and other difficult locations (Grant, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Zeichner & Hoeft, 1996).

The challenge of reforming teacher education is a daunting one, nevertheless the profession has responded to the task by acknowledging that there is a problem, and bringing the issue to the forefront in the professional literature and in other teacher education forums. Further, teacher education institutions have shown a willingness to develop and trial initiatives aimed at making novice and experienced teachers more aware of, and sensitive and responsive to cultural differences; this is as well as sensitising them to the part they can play in fostering a greater appreciation and acceptance of human diversity (Colville-Hall, MacDonald & Smolen, 1995; Wiest, 1998). It is noteworthy that in 1995 America's leading teacher education journal, the *Journal of Teacher Education* devoted two consecutive issues to the subject of preparing teachers for cultural diversity. A similar thematic issue appeared in *Action in Teacher Education* the previous year.

While the principles and practices of multicultural education receive varying (and to many people unsatisfactory) degrees of emphasis in teacher education programs across Australia, a more concerted attempt has been made in recent years to familiarise teachers in training with the needs of children with disabilities, particularly those with learning and behaviour problems. One State, NSW, has moved to set as a condition of teacher registration the completion of studies in teaching children with special needs, with a focus on inclusion and adaptive instruction (Slee, 1996). Other States are considering similar initiatives. Such moves are to be applauded and will fill a need in professional development that has been recognised for some time.

As novice teachers move into the school system for their student teaching, they encounter additional impediments to any willingness or ability they may have to differentiate instruction for diverse learners. We look now at some aspects of schoolteaching and the organisational structure of schools which stand in the way of inclusive education and adaptive instruction.

Using as their stimulus research indicating that many experienced teachers 'are reluctant or unable to differentiate instruction for academically diverse learners in heterogeneous settings' (Tomlinson et al., 1997, p.269), Tomlinson and her colleagues initiated a study of novice teachers at six university sites to determine the conditions that might inhibit or facilitate their progress towards acquiring the capacity to adapt instruction to meet the needs of individual learners. Student teachers in the study's two intervention groups

completed a six-hour workshop on teaching academically diverse learners. One of the intervention groups was also provided with a 'curriculum coach' to facilitate planning and teaching during the students' teaching practicum. While novice teachers in the two intervention groups were found to have a greater appreciation of the need for adaptive instruction, their capacity to implement such instruction was only 'modestly' greater than student teachers in the baseline group.

In seeking an explanation for the latter finding, the researchers involved in the study argued that it was the negative impact of the student teachers' enculturation into the school system which stifled efforts to employ adaptive instruction. That system, it was stated, was 'largely inhospitable to the needs of academically diverse students' (Tomlinson et al., 1997, p.276), and was one where teachers resented calls to differentiate instruction, where many were lacking the skills to do so, and where few 'robust' instructional modifications were made for either more able or struggling learners. In this environment it was difficult for students to practice what they had learned about how to teach diverse learners, and there were few, if any, models of good practice for them to aspire to. For them student teaching was like 'jumping on a moving train' with the course already set and those on board already committed to a schedule and the routines which accompany the journey (Tomlinson et al., 1997, p.276).

The nature and structure of the teaching experience in schools, which has developed over many decades, has proven to be a powerful influence on the views and practices of novice, beginning and experienced teachers. Novice and beginning teachers enter what is essentially a standardised system with implicit rules and procedures for how things should be (Tomlinson et al., 1997). Three elements of the schoolteaching experience are particularly relevant in this regard and to our discussion of student diversity, as they act to limit the capacity of teachers to respond effectively to students whose needs lie outside the expected and tolerated pattern of student behaviour and achievement. These elements are:

- The emphasis is on content coverage. Motivated by pressures from superiors and a concept of 'fairness' (a belief that all students should at least be exposed to the curriculum), teachers introduce, teach, and move on to new content, often knowing that many students have not mastered important concepts and skills and are not ready for new and/or more advanced work.

- Time is standardised for all students. The time available for instruction is fixed for all students irrespective of their ability or rate of learning. What is not learned in the time available acts to undermine chances of future success, and contributes to a widening gap in achievement between students during the school year and from year to year.
- Assessment is primarily summative in nature and standardised. All students are assessed in the same way, and for the purpose of identifying those who have and those who have not reached predetermined competency levels. Assessment information is too infrequently used for diagnostic purposes or as a basis for remedial teaching.

While schools continue to structure the educational process based on the above tenets and practices, the notion of differentiation will be severely limited. Indeed, in this environment of standardisation and uniformity, 'differentiation is an oxymoron' (Tomlinson et al., 1997, p.277).

In a commissioned paper in the *British Journal of Special Education*, Klaus Wedell, retiring professor of special education at the University of London, drew attention to some impediments to inclusion in education systems (Wedell, 1995). He referred, in particular, to the organisational principle that assumes children are taught in groups, and the corresponding inference that teaching as a consequence must be focused on some concept of common learning needs. The difficulty, according to Wedell, is that this view can lead to 'an assumed homogeneity in those pupils' (Wedell, 1995, p.100), and a resultant failure of teachers to seriously consider the need to differentiate instruction.

Wedell (1995) was also critical of policy developments which, on the one hand, recognise and accept diversity in schools and in the curriculum, but which fail to initiate, plan or even recommend any restructuring of education for schools to be able to adequately adjust to student diversity. He refers to this process as one of 'grafting' inclusive education on to education systems which are not ready to accommodate it.

On the positive side, Wedell points out that instructional approaches needed for school systems to cater for student diversity already exist, and cites as examples successes achieved with cooperative group learning and peer tutoring. What is needed, he says, is for schools and the structures within which they operate to predicate their operations on the assumption that all children

are different, to take ownership of this diversity and to critically examine their functions based on these principles (Wedell, 1995).

Restructuring education systems and schools is a difficult, and one might suggest, impossibly difficult undertaking. A more productive goal, in the short term, might be to review how schools are managed. Boscardin and Jacobson (1997) look at this challenge with particular reference to making schools more inclusive. They point out that school managers have created overly bureaucratic organisational structures which have undermined a sense of community in schools. Using Sergiovanni's definition of organisations, they see schools as having explicit management structures and procedures where there is an assumption that hierarchy equals expertise, and where individuals must negotiate at an individual level for the conditions and resources necessary to achieve their goals (Sergiovanni, 1993). Boscardin and Jacobson (1997) argue that Sergiovanni's concept of 'community' as opposed to organisation is more appropriate for schools, as it relies less on externally codified roles and expectations, and more on natural relationships based on interdependence, where there is a shared sense of belonging that develops from 'common goals, shared values, and shared conceptions of being and doing' (Sergiovanni, 1993, pp.10-11). The difficulty is that when schools seek to establish this sense of community and solidarity, diversity within the system is often viewed as a problem, and as an impediment to achieving a common focus and purpose.

It is Boscardin and Jacobson's thesis that diversity can actually be a strength and, drawing on Maxwell's concept of contiguity-based solidarity (Maxwell, 1994), suggest that within the context of the school as a community, diversity can bring with it a wider range of skills, talents and perspectives which can result in more creative responses to the many tasks and challenges facing the education process. From this viewpoint schools should focus less on how individuals are alike or different, and more on how people interact in order to achieve its objectives. Schools managed within this perspective are more likely, it is argued, to celebrate diversity and to recognise diversity within the curriculum. Again, however, for many schools this will require a major shift in orientation and a move towards a less certain although potentially more productive outcome. Whether the impetus for inclusion is sufficiently strong to help bring about these changes is questionable.

Concluding Remarks

This paper has addressed the topic of student diversity and the difficulties experienced by teachers in responding to it. The paper has moved, quite deliberately, between a consideration of multicultural education and inclusive education to highlight the challenges posed by diversity in its many forms and how, unfortunately, many teachers resist or find it extremely difficult to adapt and modify instruction to meet the needs of students with different learning and behavioural characteristics, and experiential backgrounds. The barriers to inclusion, which exist in schools because of the way schools are organised and the way instruction is delivered, were also reviewed.

While this paper has dwelt at length on the failures of teachers to adjust to the challenges posed by diverse student enrolments, it has also acknowledged that efforts are being made to address the problem. It was noted that the early childhood education sector is strongly oriented to the needs of individual students and is well placed to respond to increasing student diversity. Researchers are constantly engaged in the task of developing teaching approaches which are adaptive to the requirements of atypical students, and there currently exists a body of knowledge to guide teachers in making their curriculum and instruction more inclusive. The efforts of teacher education institutions to respond to the needs of students from diverse backgrounds and students with disabilities are commendable, given that the teacher education profession has been under siege from critics questioning its relevance and its very need to exist. Finally, the challenges of diversity in the broader school community for school administrators were discussed, with the acknowledgment that despite the difficulties of accommodating an increasing range of expectations and perspectives, there are real benefits to be gained from having a wider range of inputs, viewpoints and talents available to cope with the many problems facing public schools today.

Society too, must face up to the challenges presented by population diversity. A common implication across much of the literature on diversity in schools is that for change to occur, and for schools and the school curriculum to reflect and respect student diversity, how diversity is viewed in the broader community (as well as by educators at all levels) needs to change to reflect the reality of our changing population and student body.

It is an inescapable reality, however, that many schools and schoolteachers are seemingly in a time warp in respect of what student diversity requires of them, despite the best efforts of many educators to introduce changes to both the curriculum and to instruction. They are, seemingly, unable and/or unwilling to accept that their view of students, of curriculum, and of instruction is incongruous with the background, current experience, aspirations, and future prospects of a growing number of the students in classrooms today. It would be instructive for educators to reflect on recent statistics which show that by the year 2010 'whites will account for only about 9% of the world's population—compared with 17% in 1997—making them the world's smallest ethnic minority' (Hodgkinson, 1998, p.5). When educators begin to see the world from the perspective of membership of a steadily diminishing minority group, and less in terms of a dominant social group, they may begin to see the wisdom of creating schools and other social institutions which make a genuine effort to recognise, accept and accommodate humanity in all its diverse forms. Here is the challenge facing educators as we look towards the new millennium. That challenge also represents an incredible opportunity for one of society's most important social institutions to make a tangible and lasting contribution to improving human relations.

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