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 combination of 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. Brenner & Schwartz (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 no exception to this adverse effect 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 (Gleeson, 1997). Researchers are increasingly seeing that these may inhibit or limit their understanding and respect for all students. We know that many teachers harbour less positive views of children from single parent families (Gleeson, 1998), although recent research in Australia has come to the view that these prejudices are less evident today as rigid and conservative views of what constitutes the family are not strongly influenced by social change (Fields, 1993). New challenges, though, still await teachers in the 1990s as issues of sexual preference gradually, if reluctantly, are being addressed in schools (Pallota-Chiarolli, 1996). Teachers find themselves in the forefront of these concerns about drug abuse, homophobia and youth suicide. Little in their professional preparation has prepared them for the task of addressing these problems. To ignore them, however, is 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 school in order to have 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 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, Saiont & Taylor, 1993). Social class, economic class, age and ability (York, 1991), and family lifestyle (Jones & Derma-Spars, 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’’ has been well documented. The terms ‘‘integration’’ and ‘‘mainstreaming’’ implied a focus on children who were not normally considered part of general education, and as such were not accepted by the mainstream society. Further, the processes of integration and mainstreaming placed considerable emphasis on eligibility criteria for regular class placement (Detter, 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 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, 1995), and was based on the view that the tracking instruction to the needs of low ability, average and above average students (Gamaron, 1992). While it is recognised that more able students often benefit from better quality, more challenging instruction in heterogeneous 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 (Vait, 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 unequal tracking arrangements. Students on ability, and whether consciously or not on other characteristics as well, such as socioeconomic status and race (Abraham, 1995; Caldus & Bankston, 1998; Gamoran & Mays, 1989).

Support for Heterogeneous Classes

The creation of heterogeneous classes has been argued and supported for a long time 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 the creation of smaller heterogeneous classes. The arguments advance in support of the creation of smaller heterogeneous classes are generally based on the idea that smaller heterogeneous classes create equally diverse class groups. In addition, a strong argument has been made that there should exist in schools equality of opportunity (Garnier, 1985). The arguments advance in support of the creation of smaller heterogeneous classes are generally based on the idea that smaller heterogeneous classes may help educators provide educational opportunities that meet the needs of all students in the class.

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 tradi tional 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

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the learning process. While these results are encouraging, they were obtained in the context where the teachers are 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 homogeneous in their makeup, and this is necessitating a reassignment of the appropriateness of school curricula and instruction for all students (Klingner, 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 socially and economically disadvantaged) (Brownell & Schumm, 1998).

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

"Now picture this: 34 children in an urban third-grade classroom, one-third of whom live on welfare, 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 have a learning disability, six 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, DiPillo, & Pallas, 1990; Pumon, Jones, Rock, & Fernandez, 1993).

How do teachers face with such diversity in student cultural and experiential backgrounds, and abilities, provide instruction that is responsive and adaptive to the needs of these students? The interaction with Fouch (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' 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 recent mandates to differentiate curriculum and instruction for a wide range of students (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? Against 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' (Fouch, 1997). They are provided with fewer modifications to instruction than more able students (Baker & Zigmond, 1990; Durkin, 1990; Fulk & Smith, 1995; Zigmond & Baker, 1996), less direct teacher instruction and supervised practice than high-achieving students (Hall, Delquadri, Greenwood & Thurston, 1982; O'Sullivan, Ysseldyke, Christenson, & Thurlow, 1989). 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 classroom enrolment patterns.

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 greater efforts are made to create 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 place a greater emphasis upon 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 programme armed at improving the academic skills of disadvantaged children, Skinnner, 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 inappropriae behaviour. 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 education. This is the case in a state of 'denial' about imperatives to recognise and 'celebrate' cultural diversity in the curriculum and in their teaching. Erwin (1998) reports many teachers believed the multicultural education is thought by many to reproduce social inequalities and be...remediate' (Erwin, 1998, p.323). Teachers have been criticised for their lack of sensitivity to student differences and their reluctance to move beyond the largely Eurocentric curriculum which they are accustomed to, but our findings suggest that 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
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 of 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; Melnick & 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 & Hoffman, 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 foreground in the professional literature and in other teacher education forums. Further, teacher education institutions have shown a willingness to develop and adopt new instructional strategies, 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 (Celville-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 made this 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 systems for their initial 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 culture and 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 'teaching coach' who monitored and examined the 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, and the opportunity 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 may be the negative impact of the student teachers' re-enculturation into the school system which stifled efforts to employ adaptive instruction. That system, it was stated, was 'largely inhospitable to the needs of schools, which have 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 institutional 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 alongside them and those struggling to get 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 have 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 who are accustomed to 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 be exposed to all of the curricular content), 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.
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 train school managers to understand and manage the 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 (Wedell, 1993). Boscadin 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. This would suggest that 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 collective ability or achievement, is a flawed assumption.

The difficulty, according to Wedell, is that views 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, recognises and accepts diversity in schools and in the curriculum, and on the other hand, fails to initiate, plan or even recommend any restructing 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 cite 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

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.

It shows that by the year 2010 whites will account for only about 75% of the world's population—compared with 17% in 1997 making them the world's smallest ethnic minority' (Hodgkinson, 1998, p.5).

The challenges facing educators today are, therefore, a survival problem. From the perspective of a 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 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 in the 21st century, and more in the next 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.

References