Potential barriers to engaging with multicultural communities

Transcript

Speakers: Sheralee Fordham, Ziyad Serhan and Tasneem Chopra

Sheralee Forham

So, what are some of the potential barriers to engaging authentically with the diversity of cultures in school communities? We've got a few options on the poll there. Or if you've got something else, tell us in the chat. Oh, we've already got some people rolling in with their responses, Ziyad.

Ziyad Serhan

Yeah, I think one of the most dominant responses we can see is the fear of saying the wrong thing.

Sheralee Fordham

I guess that that's a real thing because you don't want to offend people, but sometimes our curiosity can be something that, we really want to know something, but we just don't know how to ask it. So I think acknowledging that fact that we have that curiosity is important. And then I guess being as respectful as we can in that, maybe considering what the other person might think when we ask that question can be really helpful. Or if you've got people in your world that might know a little bit about that culture, that can be useful. What do you, how would you approach that?

Ziyad Serhan

I believe that having some, a normal fear is actually part of being authentic. Naturally, curiosity might drive us to wanting to find out more and usually cultures where individuals that see that you're trying to authentically engage, even if you make a mistake, you know, it can acknowledge that that's okay. So it's really about that connection and building those relationships that, that is so crucial and important.

Sheralee Fordham

The other thing that polled pretty high there too, was the 'feeling the need to know more before you engage'. And I think that point you make about being authentic with that engaging. Sometimes we can paralyse ourselves with 'I need to know more. I need to know more. I need to know more' but in actual fact if you're not already in that culture and community, you're actually never going to have enough knowledge. So I think, sometimes, just authentically diving in is a good way to approach that.

Ziyad Serhan

Absolutely. Absolutely. So we're going to pass over now to Tasneem, who's going to take us through some foundational terminologies and bringing her insights to the conversation. So, over to you Tasneem.

Tasneem Chopra

So, I guess the first point of starting this is, you know, we talk about: What is the actual experience for children that are coming from these CALD backgrounds - these culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. And why is it even an issue that needs to be agendaed? And it needs to be agendaed because often the cultural collateral that they're bringing to the school space is causing them to experience their school life in a very different way to say, well, the dominant cultural group might be experiencing or the mainstream community will be experiencing.

And this is important because it'll help you often, again, understand issues of behaviour that might be concerning. They might be presenting with issues that you don't necessarily recognise or have seen with students, again, historically from dominant the dominant culture. So knowing what those triggers are, it helps you then respond better. So in some of these triggers or some of these issues might be the background or settlement experience of children that they bring to school. And often we're dealing with children who've arrived as refugees or migrants or asylum seeker background, for example. They're experience automatically as newly-arrived Australians or citizens even into this country is mired with settlement trauma. And that can impact their ability to function essentially in the most, sort of, efficient way that ability to communicate safely, to be understood, to want to relate, to understand what a school system is in a new, in a new country with a new language, with new people and new teachers. Where everything's different, there's a massive bar of adaptation that they have to meet. And it's not spelt out very clearly, obviously prior to settlement, if they're, if their immersion into Australian culture has been basically posited on escaping a war torn experience or being forced to relocate into a new country, when they had, once upon a time been very happy in their own.

So adjusting to these new experiences on the back of trauma will automatically mean that their experience of the Australian education system is very different and will require a different sensitivity in handling and approach from you as educators and workers in the mental health area. And, of course, culture, that that can also be an issue that will, to some extent, frame the experienced interaction that students are having or young children are having in the schooling system, even in early childhood, because if they're not necessarily used to formal education or a formal school system, it can be new. It can be, it can be foreboding and if the parents of these children, themselves, are still grasping with, as I mentioned earlier, just the settlement issue. The idea of managing their child's psychological transitioning to school isn't necessarily the highest on their agenda of survival. It's more related to housing security employment. So often these kids are sometimes thrown into a new cultural experience a little bit in the deep end, if they don't necessarily have the adequate support systems from parents, not because they don't care that they don't necessarily have the support and resources at that moment to provide to the children, which again, becomes an area where the school community and working professionals can think about how can we do better to support those particular students whose families want the best for them but they don't necessarily have the resources to provide it.

I talk about economic factors and political climate here, they can impact the experience for students as well, depending on how other students perceive them and see them. So cultural bias, to be really frank, talking about, you know, issues of racism that even young children will experience because other children bringing perceptions that they've drawn from home experiences or their own communities.

These are real. And so not to blend this into bullying per se, but certainly issues of racism can stand on their own that need to be addressed, and that can be informed by political conflicts overseas, which then transferred to the playground, if you like, in Australia that need to be watched and managed. And this was only going to, I guess, become apparently when you dissect or interrogate

the cultural background of students and see where are they from? What's going on? How has this been informed? Why are kids necessarily saying antagonistic things to other kids and how are they receiving it? And what's the impetus for this? So, often, it's not just, like I said, bullying per se can be informed by something bigger. It's not a common practice, but it's certainly one to be aware of and certainly African Australian students from a range of African communities would be far more likely to be experiencing this at the brunt-end of hostilities than again, the dominant culture.

Sector education and awareness. So this can impact the experience of students when the school community itself, their approach to dealing with CALD communities is considered, it's not a high priority. They don't see it as a need. There there's an attitude of, 'well, they're here now, they need to adapt to the way that we do things. And this is how it's done'.

And I will keep coming back to the issue of the difference between that model and an effective model is meeting students where they're at and as opposed to expecting students to meet the school community where the school community model is at.

And I bring this up because in cases of vulnerability amplified by, maybe, a cultural barrier - it is so much harder for both the children and their families to access the resources and support that they need from a school environment due to, maybe, limited language and limited cultural literacy about the schooling education system. So the expectation for them to meet you where you're at, as opposed to the other way around I think it needs to be seriously agendaed as it has as one of the very many critical points to do better.

So the importance of culture, diversity and inclusion, I think, without labouring the quintessentially obvious here is it's about belonging. And when we recognise that the students' vast cultural backgrounds that you will encounter, perhaps, in your teaching career can actually enrich the school and class experience, not just for them and you but, perhaps, for the entire school or class set.

We are not just a melting pot. In fact, I don't like that term melting pot and rather than look at each student as, as a melting pot, look at them as, and this is an analogy that I'll share: a melting pot is, by definition, everything coming together into a massive blend. Which might sound efficient but what it actually does is it takes away from the nuance and individual capacity and greatness of each individual person and the cultural growth, breadth that they bring. So rather than look at a cohort of diverse students or diverse children in your care as a melting pot, look at them as a fruit salad. I know that sounds corny, but literally that's individual fruit, brought together still, incredible. Still amazing that are recognised, respected and understood for the breadth that they bring. And together, this collective means that you understand that the wealth of cultural diversity is, is a bonus, but individually they will bring in their own particular assets and breadth too.