

## EXAMINING NON-DOMINANT CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES IN PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE

Wendy Amosa and James G. Ladwig  
The University of Newcastle

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While the *Quality teaching* framework (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2003b) and recent syllabus reform efforts in NSW assert the importance of valuing non-dominant cultural knowledges and values in pedagogical practice, there has been little empirical examination of the ways in which non-dominant cultural perspectives are integrated in students' learning experiences and the implications for such perspectives on students' learning outcomes. The Systemic implications of pedagogy and achievement in NSW public schools research study (SIPA) allows for such an investigation to take place by drawing on data strands made available by classroom observations, assessment tasks and student work samples. In this paper, we outline the framework through which the SIPA research study will aim to inform current understandings of the practices and effect of pedagogies that value non-dominant cultural perspectives.

Our outline commences with clarification of the interpretation of the term "cultural knowledge" that will be used for the purpose of this research. We then examine current justifications for the inclusion of cultural knowledge in students' learning contexts, recognising that much of the current reasoning makes little if any attempt to explicitly prioritise improved learning outcomes for students. In an effort to prioritise a rationale of student achievement for inclusion of cultural knowledge, we guide our analysis with three research questions. First, in what ways are non-dominant cultural knowledges legitimised in students' classroom and assessment experiences? Second, in what ways do students engage with non-dominant cultural knowledge? Third, to what extent are students' learning outcomes affected by the inclusion of non-dominant cultural knowledge in pedagogy? The methods by which we plan to respond to these questions within the context of the SIPA research project are outlined in the final section of the paper.

### Defining "cultural knowledge"

For the purpose of this paper and research in the SIPA research project, cultural knowledge focuses on the extent to which non-dominant cultural knowledges are legitimised in classrooms. The use of the term "legitimised" is crucial here, noting that meaningful cultural knowledge requires more than acts of inclusion or assertions of appreciation. It is equally important to clarify which cultures are included in the non-dominant domain. As outlined in Ladwig and King (2003), there exists a generalised archetype of a traditional dominant culture typically presented as "Australian" in most school curricula. Thus, non-dominant cultural knowledge can therefore be distinguished from this dominant Australian archetype by social group identifiers such as sex, ethnicity, race, religion, economic status, sexuality and age. In the Australian context, non-dominant cultural knowledge would include the study of multiethnic literary texts, consideration of historical and current societal and political issues from an Indigenous perspective, or working class understandings of consumerism and cosmopolitanism. Non-dominant cultural knowledge is legitimised when there is explicit valuing and authentic consideration of cultural identity represented in such things as beliefs, languages, practices and ways of knowing.

It is important to note here that the understanding of cultural knowledge just stated ventures beyond the notion of multicultural knowledge as selectively defined by the NSW Department of

Education and Training (NSW DET) in their multicultural education policies, programs and initiatives, which focus on cultural diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, language and religion alone (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c; NSW Department of School Education, 1983). This inconsistency in definition is noted due to the resultant implications of any kind of reform (such as *Quality teaching*), in which the valuing of non-dominant cultural knowledges and understandings beyond those linked to race and ethnicity (such those associated with disability, sex, sexuality and socio-economic status) are not supported by the initiatives, standards and responsibilities outlined by the departmental unit responsible for cultural diversity.

While pathways for inclusion of cultural knowledge are commonly recognised in subjects such as history and literary studies, where working-class perspectives and those of women and Indigenous people can be identified with relative ease, Ladwig and King (2003) provide an overview of the ways that cultural knowledge can also be valued in subjects such as mathematics and science, by understanding these disciplines within a historical perspective that acknowledges and presents alternative (to dominant) mathematical and scientific knowledge systems.

### **Justifications for cultural knowledge**

Both formal curriculum reform efforts and informal curriculum effects have attributed much attention to the use of cultural knowledge in Australian classrooms. Such attention is evident at a national level, highlighted by the goals of the *Adelaide declaration* (MCEETYA 1999), which suggest that such an understanding of Australia's cultural diversity is imperative for Australia's future. Further examples of the increased attention to non-dominant cultural knowledge is evident in the recent syllabus reforms in New South Wales, such as the revised English Years 7 to Ten syllabus (Board of Studies NSW, 2002) which requires every English student to study texts that reflect the cultural diversity of Australia and the world. Such reform can also be noted in the new Years 7 to 10 History syllabus (Board of Studies NSW, 2003), which improves (from its predecessor) the exposure of women's role in history and the inclusion of feminist and working-class historical perspectives, Aboriginal history and Aboriginal knowledge in the history curriculum.

The rationale for the increasing emergence and seeming importance of non-dominant cultural perspectives in the curriculum is often left to be assumed rather than explicitly stated. Perspectives vary from positions of perceptions to privilege, and are predominantly framed in line with the goals of multicultural education. McCarthy (1993) identified that goals and principles of multicultural education have been grounded in the various perspectives and ideological beliefs of various forms of multicultural education discourse. For some multiculturalists, a discourse of cultural understanding dominates approaches to multiculturalism. Theorists who engage in this kind of discourse focus attention on the recognition and acceptance of cultural differences in an effort to improve societal relations among the various cultural divisions that constitute society. For others, an emphasis on cultural competence drives multicultural education initiatives. This view endeavours to sustain cultural diversity and to ensure that all students attain a competent awareness and understanding of the cultural values and practices of non-dominant cultural groups. McCarthy also identified a model of cultural emancipation which proposes that a reformed multicultural curriculum can have positive transforming outcomes for future social and economic success. This discourse provides a reformed multicultural curriculum with the means to improve not only educational outcomes for all students, but with the capacity to allow such improvements to revolutionise the common realities of social inequality. McCarthy warned of the inherent assumptions within these discourses that give faith to inadequately researched assumed causal relationships, such as the notions that exposure to diversity leads to a change of attitudes about diversity, that a change of attitudes lead to a change of behaviours, and that a change of behaviours will lead to renewed social and economic opportunity. It is with these assumptions in mind that we consider the ways in which students' learning outcomes might be affected by a curriculum that legitimises cultural knowledge.

While formal curriculum considerations, such as those evident by the revised NSW Board of Studies syllabus documents, provide documented and visible directives that support all students' engagement with non-dominant cultural perspectives, Apple (1979) argued that it is important for teachers and researchers to acknowledge the ways in which the cultures and values of the dominant groups in society enter the implementation of the formal curriculum. Apple asserted that the cultural values and practices of the dominant group in society are emphasised in the formal curriculum, while the meanings and values that are central to non-dominant cultures are "neglected, excluded, diluted, or reinterpreted" (Apple, 1979, p.82). As the previous discussion regarding the formal curriculum directives relating to the integration of non-dominant perspectives might suggest, the meanings and values of non-dominant cultures are clearly acknowledged by NSW DET, BOS NSW and MCEETYA priorities, at least in terms of an inclusive curriculum. The inclusion of references to non-dominant perspectives in the formal curriculum directives signals the surge of awareness of multicultural education imperatives that have emerged in both Australian and US contexts (McCarthy, 1993; McCarthy & Apple, 1988). However, what Apple and others might question is the extent to which the realities of practice resonate with the guidelines and policy imperatives for such practice. In other words, to what extent do teachers and schools in their capacities as institutions exercise power, make choices and direct learning in ways that reflect a solitary dominant culture, despite the formal curriculum directives that guide a broader ideology? As Bernstein (1997; 2000) suggested, how and what a society selects to be public educational knowledge reflects principles of social control which allow for the dominant culture to be transmitted through the hidden agenda, or curriculum interpretations of those in power to select what knowledge is learned in schools. Recognising the argument offered by numerous cultural analysts of curriculum, Ladwig and King (2003) assert that curriculum knowledge in Australia has been constructed and framed within a set of dominant "Australian" cultural definitions, understandings and conventions, which operate to ascribe higher standing and power to the dominant culture than it does to non-dominant cultural knowledges and understandings.

McCarthy (1993) recognised that measuring the virtues of the formal curriculum's efforts to address non-dominant perspectives simply by acknowledging inclusion of such perspectives or references to such perspectives in the formal curriculum, ignores the more pressing importance of generating emancipatory multicultural reform in school curriculum. In other words, salient with Rosado's (1999) identification of transformations of mind and behaviours, merely including non-dominant cultural knowledge in the curriculum does not, in itself, generate the transformative goals such as cultural empowerment and emancipatory knowledge that are espoused by proponents of multicultural education. McCarthy asserted that discussions of representation in the curriculum must be integrated with consideration of the unequal circulation of resources and power beyond the school context. In addition, the ways that non-dominant perspectives are integrated in the formal curriculum and how they are subsequently treated in learning environments represent a hidden agenda of authority. This hidden agenda of authority may be exemplified by common practice which, while addressing non-dominant cultural perspectives, does so through a dominant lens by placing the act of inclusion of such perspectives as a charitable and socially conscious move rather than one warranted by the inherent value of non-dominant perspectives and knowledges. The absence of any attempts to identify relationships between legitimisation of non-dominant cultural knowledges and improved student learning outcomes further blurs the credibility of mere acts of inclusion.

There is little evidence to suggest that, in terms of cultural knowledge, a reformed curriculum by way of syllabus revisions and declarations of priorities constitutes a sufficient condition to promote improvement in achievement or significant realignment of pedagogical practice. This lack of evidence is undoubtedly a result of the absence of consideration of enhanced student achievement in most formal curriculum directives that consider non-dominant cultural knowledge. Neither the NSW DET's "current" Multicultural education policy (NSW Department of School Education, 1983) or the latest draft revised version (NSW Department of School Education, 2004) prioritise learning outcomes in their goals. On its internet support site for multicultural education, the NSW DET (2002b) states that inclusion of non-dominant perspectives in the curriculum encourages social harmony as well as an understanding of the cultural diversity of Australia's society, yet no references are made to student learning outcomes. There is much more to be learned about how cultural knowledge occurs, is fostered and impacts on student learning.

## Research questions

Given that there has been little empirical examination of the ways in which non-dominant cultural perspectives are integrated in students' learning experiences and the implications for such perspectives on students' learning outcomes, we aim to supplement the overall research aims of the SIPA project (in terms of the efficacy of *Quality teaching* in the NSW public school context) with an investigation of the potential relationships between cultural knowledge and student learning outcomes. Three questions will guide the analysis. First, in what ways are non-dominant cultural knowledges legitimised in students' classroom and assessment experiences? Second, in what ways do students engage with non-dominant cultural knowledge? Third, to what extent are students' learning outcomes affected by the inclusion of non-dominant cultural knowledge in pedagogy?

## Methods and data sources

The SIPA research project allows for this investigation to take place by allowing us to draw on three data strands made available by: 1) classroom observations; 2) assessment task data; and 3) student work samples.

*Classroom observations:* In line with the longitudinal data collection processes inherent in the design of the SIPA research project, field visits conducted by a team consisting of researchers from The University of Newcastle and NSW DET personnel offer the opportunity to conduct direct observations of approximately 960 lessons (two observations per field visit per class), using a classroom observation manual based on the *Quality teaching* framework. As one of the elements coded by researchers during the process of classroom observations, the extent to which lessons regularly incorporate the cultural knowledge of diverse social groupings is coded on a one to five scale which ranges from (1) no evidence of explicit recognition or valuing of non-dominant cultural knowledge in the substance of the lesson to (5) evidence of substantial cultural knowledge is recognised and valued throughout the lesson and this knowledge is accepted as equal to the dominant culture.

*Assessment task data:* The collection and coding of assessment tasks and student performances at six points from 2004 to 2007 will replicate the procedures used in Newmann, Marks and Gamoran (1996) and subsequent studies led by Newmann (Newmann, Bryk, & Nagaoka, 2001; Smith, Lee, & Newmann, 2001). For each data collection, teachers in the targeted classes submit sets of student work on regular assessment tasks. Approximately 1200 assessment tasks will be coded using a manual for measuring pedagogy as represented in the quality of learning tasks, developed by Ladwig and Gore and the NSW DET as the central component of the third phase of the *Quality teaching* initiative. The 15-item, three-dimensional *Quality teaching* scale will be used to code the degree to which the tasks exhibit high levels of quality pedagogy, within each of the three dimensions: Intellectual quality, Quality learning environment, and Significance. As with the *Classroom practice guide* (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2003a), the extent to which lessons regularly incorporate the cultural knowledge of diverse social groupings is coded on a one to five scale which ranges from (1) no evidence of explicit recognition or valuing of non-dominant cultural knowledge in the substance of the lesson to (5) evidence of substantial cultural knowledge is recognised and valued throughout the lesson and this knowledge is accepted as equal to the dominant culture. Using the results of the coding of the extent to which the tasks incorporate the cultural knowledge of diverse social groupings, tasks with higher than average scores for Cultural knowledge will be further analysed using a classification for cultural knowledge, adapted from Amosa's (2002) Multiethnic literature classifications.

*Student performance data:* Two forms of student performance data will be made available by the SIPA research project. First, unless parents and students exercise their right not to participate in the study, the NSW DET will provide the researchers with background information

about the students including their sex and ethnicity, as well as some prior achievement data such as their results from Basic Skills Tests (in Years 3 and 5) and Years 7 and 8 tests of literacy and numeracy. Students' identities will not be linked to this data and the researchers will not be able to identify any individual students from any of the information released from the NSW DET. Second, as described above, teachers will submit sets of student work on regular assessment tasks at six points throughout the four-year study. Two forms of analysis will be conducted on this data. First, and informed by prior research, subject-specific manuals for scoring student performance on a four item scale (each item being a four-point Likert scale) have been developed for the SIPA research study (Ladwig, Gore, Griffiths, & Amosa, 2004). Measures of the quality of student performance for the estimated 36,000 pieces of student work will be scored on: Problematic knowledge (students demonstrating an understanding of knowledge not as a fixed body of information, but as being socially constructed); Construction of knowledge (students manipulating information and ideas in ways which transform their meanings and implications); Deep understanding (students demonstrating relatively systematic, integrated or holistic understandings of important ideas or concepts in the discipline); and Elaborated communication (students demonstrating a coherent communication of ideas, concepts, arguments or explanations). Second, measures of student engagement will be used to examine the ways in which student work demonstrates students' engagement with their learning and the ways in which they might engage with cultural knowledge.

The wealth of this data will generate both opportunities and challenges for the research. While an examination of potential relationships among the quality of pedagogy, the use of cultural knowledge, student engagement and student achievement will be achievable, attentive consideration must be paid to the reliability and limitations of the measures that will be used throughout the analysis.

### **Contributions of the research**

The research proposed in this paper will provide an examination of the ways in which non-dominant cultural perspectives are integrated in students' learning experiences and the implications for such perspectives on students' learning outcomes. Such examination is crucial to an informed consideration of current justifications for cultural knowledge and clear insight about the legitimacy of claims purporting the transforming potentials of cultural knowledge.

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