

MEDIA RELEASE



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News editors - Dr Arber is available for pre interviews after 2pm Thursday 5 June, 2008. Please contact Sandra Kingston 0422 005 485 in the first instance

Deakin researcher identifies opportunity to make schools more inclusive

Australian schools need to rethink the way they talk about race and ethnic relationships to create a more inclusive and enriching --- experience for students, a Deakin academic says.

Dr Ruth Arber, whose book *Race, Ethnicity and Education in Globalised Times* will be launched later today, argues that school communities need to stop and consider the effect that commonsense notions about students circulating within the school and the wider community have on the ways teachers work with them

“There is a sort of noisy silence, if you like, on these issues,” said Dr Arber.

“Newspapers and public policy avoid discussions about race relationships, even when discussions about national identity and direction are crucial themes.

“We need to find a way to talk comfortably about racial relationships. Avoiding repeating common-place understandings around a particular ethnic group would be a good start.”

Dr Arber’s book is a compilation of 20 years of research on how schools and the people within them spoke about race and ethnic relationships.

The research illustrates the way that school communities talk, but in fact don’t talk about race and ethnic relationships. Both teachers and parents spoke a lot about the multicultural programs and policies they introduced. Newspaper articles discussed immigration and refugee policies, English language curriculum and globalisation.

“My research confirmed there are conscientious teachers and schools are doing some fabulous work to include all of their students.

“However, some students and teachers reported that they felt different and were excluded from aspects of school life because of race, cultural, linguistic or religious difference.

“This was mainly because despite the best of intentions people generally work with common-sense notions about the people before them. This affects how they work with them. Teachers are no exception to this.

According to Dr Arber’s research, taken-for-granted stereotypes continued to define some groups as different. However, the ways that these stereotypes were used changed over time. In earlier research, the ways that teachers repeated common-sense notions about

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their students was often quite blatant. Teachers were often 'in shock' in dealing with immigrant students as they had had no experience in working with them. Like all stereotypes these common-stories were quite paradoxical.

"So for instance in the early years of the research some 20 years ago, students from South America, 'the Spanish kids' were characterised as being lazy, ignorant of the education system and not academic. Paradoxically they were also seen as Bohemian, fun loving and knowing how to live life to the full."

"Asian students were seen as being good at maths and science, good, quiet, and passive but also members of dangerous gangs who walked around with knives," she said.

More recently, common-sense understandings still define how some groups are seen as different from the general community. But these understandings now appear even more contradictory. Teachers feel more experienced in the ways that they work with immigrant students. They have travelled more and have friends and relatives who belong to different ethnic groups. They are much more confident about their skills in working cross culturally and cross linguistically.

Today's teachers are careful about speaking about different groups and work hard to include all of their students in their classes. Yet still they repeat common-sense understandings – and misunderstandings-- that differentiate and exclude some of their students within the school.

Asian students, for instance, are still often seen as being good at maths and as being less creative in the ways that they approached language and art subjects. Even though many had been in Australia for several generations, they are still seen as being Australian but as not quite Australian.

'Spanish kids' are no longer spoken about at all

"The danger with these stories is that the students are all individuals, with different life stories and many have a long family history in Australia.

"Such stories can shape and inhibit teaching. If you assume students are good at maths you won't necessarily ensure that they get help if they need it; and likewise you may be organising English language support for a student when they don't really need it."

"It is important to emphasise that these are caring teachers who want and indeed must be able to discuss the needs of their students. They do not want to make note of the differences between their students, yet to do their jobs well they need to know and appreciate the different needs of each of their students. The problem is that by often repeating taken-for-granted stories about their students, they equally often fail to see who their students really are.

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“We always need to remember that teachers are representative of the whole of our society and that the stories they tell are the stories we use ourselves.

“Yet if we are to be an inclusive society, we need to think about the common-sense stories we recreate and how this is influencing our behaviour towards others.”

Dr Arber's book - Race, Ethnicity and Education in Globalised Times will be launched on Thursday, 5 June at 5.30pm at the Deakin University Art Gallery, Deakin University, 221 Burwood Highway, Burwood 3125

Media contact: Dr Arber is available for interview. Please contact Sandra Kingston 0422 005 485 in the first instance.