1987

Why we need Multicultural Education: a review of the "Ethnic Disadvantage"

Mary Kalantzis
University of Wollongong

Bill Cope
University of Wollongong

Recommended Citation
http://ro.uow.edu.au/cmsocpapers/3
Why we need Multicultural Education: a review of the "Ethnic Disadvantage"

Abstract
A number of educational critics have recently been arguing that non-English speaking background (NESB) students are not disadvantaged in their participation in Australian education and that special-purpose programs, such as multicultural education programs, are founded on misplaced assumptions. In the first part of this paper we critically examine pre-suppositions that inform these arguments as presented by Williams, Birrell, Bullivant and Mistilis. In order to disprove the fundamental thrust of these new educational critics, we go on in the second part of this paper to marshall evidence in support of opposing views.
Why we need Multicultural Education: A review of the "Ethnic Disadvantage" Debate
Mary Kalantzis
Bill Cope
Why we need Multicultural Education: A review of the "Ethnic Disadvantage" Debate
Mary Kalantzis
Bill Cope
ABSTRACT

New Arguments Against Multicultural Education
A number of educational critics have recently been arguing that non-English speaking background (NESB) students are not disadvantaged in their participation in Australian education and that special-purpose programs, such as multicultural education programs, are founded on misplaced assumptions. In the first part of this paper we critically examine pre-suppositions that inform these arguments as presented by Williams, Birrell, Bullivant and Mistilis.

Contrary Evidence
In order to disprove the fundamental thrust of these new educational critics, we go on in the second part of this paper to marshall evidence in support the following propositions:

1. Educational advantage/disadvantage is distributed unevenly between ethnic groups.

2. We simply do not have adequate statistics to generalise about NESB as an enabling/disabling factor. Considerable evidence suggests, however, that NESB is a factor which frequently leads to educational disadvantage.

3. Inter-generational mobility through education does not compensate for first generation disadvantage.

4. NESB students' mobility patterns in education are in part the long-term result of the post-war boom. These do not necessarily continue through the recession period of the seventies and eighties.

5. High rates of school retention for NESB students do not necessarily imply school success.

6. Those students of NESB who succeed, do so against longer odds.

7. Racism is still a serious problem in schools.

8. Generalisation about the performance of ethnic groups ignores the fact that they themselves are deeply divided socio-economically and by school performance. Even if one small stratum appears to be succeeding, the majority is not.
9. Gender further complicates the ethnicity-class relationship.

10. In the middle range of education - technical and trades qualifications - NESB students are under-represented. At the same time, NESB youth unemployment is high.

11. Refugees have specific needs that require special servicing.

**Revitalising Multicultural Education**

Birrell and Bullivant, particularly, point to some of the difficulties of multicultural education practice. In the final section of this paper we argue that rather than abandon multicultural education and given the extensive on-going need that the new educational critics attempt to deny, we need to move on to a stronger multiculturalism which combines concern for cultural pluralism with the objective of social equity.
NEW ARGUMENTS AGAINST MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

A vacuum of policy and practice is currently developing as progressivist education is being wound down. The basis of this winding-down is principally fiscal. We have witnessed the end of the Multicultural Education Program, cuts to the Participation and Equity program, reductions in inservice training programs, to cite just a few notable examples. But, at an official level, much of the rhetoric of progressivism continues, except that its basic support structures are now being removed, one by one.

Into this vacuum a number of new educational critics are now moving. One of their emblematic themes is that the conventional wisdoms and the theory about educational disadvantage upon which much educational policy and funding has been based, are mythical. So, as Trevor Williams argues in his ACER Research Monograph, 'Participation in Education', $429 million or 9% of the Commonwealth's Education Budget was spent in 1984-5 in support of programs such as the Disadvantaged Schools Program, the Participation and Equity Program and the Rural Schooling Development Program. Yet 'among these eligible to enter higher education ... there is no socio-economic imbalance to speak of' and 'there is little evidence ... that gender, geography and ethnicity restrict access to education'.

Our particular concern in this paper is with the emergence of arguments that 'ethnic disadvantage' is a myth. This is only one aspect of Williams' overall thrust. Others, notably Birrell, Bullivant and Mistilis, have aimed specifically to show that being of non-English-speaking background is not a factor which produces educational disadvantage. In fact, they argue that this might even be an advantage. We want to explore these claims through a review and critique of the interventions of these new educational critics, and then present evidence that shows their arguments conveniently distort some fundamental realities of the situation. We will argue that these critics are themselves creating some new myths which might cynically be used to fill the policy vacuum created by fiscal cuts.

These new myths are potentially very dangerous. For example, immigration continues at very high, indeed, increasing levels. Currently, the figure is over 100,000 per annum, and the sources for immigrants are more diverse than ever. This is a bi-partisan policy. Not only has Labor shed its traditional misgivings and increased immigration significantly in recent years, but reports indicate that the conservative parties, given the chance, would increase Labor's intake significantly. This produces a situation of cultural diversity which needs to be serviced in all core social institutions. This is probably more critical in education than in any other arena, given its socialising role and its role in opening doors to social participation. A society in which immigrants are de facto excluded, or in which existing residents feel bitterly the competition of immigrants in education and on the
labour market, could become extremely volatile, unpleasant and unproductive. Education has a crucial role in fostering social cohesion in a multi-ethnic context, ensuring that equitable access is available to all groups. The new critics of progressivist education might well be right to challenge the effectiveness of some of the programs that have attempted to right educational disadvantage. But the issues those programs have attempted to address, with some success at least, are still real and pressing.

Preference Produces Participation - Williams
Right from the beginning of his report, Williams is mindful of the relationship of research, policy and funding. He sets out to re-examine the cluster of presuppositions upon which special purpose funding has been based. His major finding, in a nutshell, is that although inequality cannot be denied, it cannot be explained in terms of educational disadvantage. Thus the barely hidden implication for access and equity policy is that specialist funding is at best an inefficient use of resources and at worst a waste.

How does Williams reach these conclusions? Success in the early years of schooling is shown to be a key factor contributing to future participation in the post-compulsory phase of education. This reflects poorly on an elementary education system when, as Williams points out, only 37% finish year 12 and only 31% move on to tertiary education in a TAFE college, 9% in a university and 10% in a CAE.

By age 19 one in every five persons has enrolled either at a university or enrolled in higher education either at a university or a CAE. Three-quarters of these are in degree programs. In each instance the social mix of student populations fails to reflect the social composition of the population as a whole. Seventy five percent of students in higher education come from white collar backgrounds. Those from wealthy families outweigh those from poorer families by three to one, relatively speaking. Disproportionate [i.e. relatively larger] numbers of persons from non-English-speaking immigrant backgrounds attend. Marginally smaller proportions of rural students are represented. The participation rate of students from non-government, non-Catholic schools is more than three times that of students from government schools. Gender differences are minor overall but smaller proportions of female year 12 graduates enrol in higher education. Level of achievement in school has a marked effect on participation with ten per cent or more of higher achieving students attending, relative to less than 10 per cent of those in the lowest achievement quartile. And few persons completing less that 12 years of schooling ever enter higher education by age 19. Of those who complete Year 12 about 50 per cent enrol in University or CAE.2

Setting aside for a moment the alleged disproportionate representation of immigrant groups of non-English-speaking background, the conclusions Williams draws from what would seem to be damning evidence about the importance yet relative ineffectiveness of the education system, are peculiar indeed. '... While social status restricts participation, it
does not restrict access. Social status differences are mostly differences in the preference for education.³

This sounds very much like the old story of equality of opportunity and unevenness of individual motivation (which happens to correlate with socio-economic background). What, then, according to Williams, should be done in education to improve retention rates? The implications of Williams' findings are not explicitly spelt out other than to suggest diversification of assessment procedures, curriculum and teaching methods. This suggestion is rather contradictory, however, when Williams's own evidence shows that non-government schools which maintain traditional academic curriculum and orient themselves to traditional assessment and credentialling produce much higher retention rates. The conclusion, in this context, is extremely curious.

More generally the best hope for increasing retention at least and both learning and retention at best, are the so-called alternative year 12 programs being mounted in several states. While their success remains to be demonstrated, they seem to be doing all the things one would expect to have an influence on the educational preferences [sic] of young people.

Retention to what end? The 'alternative' subjects in the diversified curriculum practically preclude movement into education in universities and colleges. Williams' conclusions might well be consistent with a thrust that minimalises financial commitment to education. This approach does not require state schools to be resourced in the same way that non-government schools are, with their higher retention rates and credentialling for college and university. Even less does it demand affirmative special resourcing of some schools so that retention rates for post-secondary education are equalised. The report seems to be saying that no amount of funding will change the fact that some groups just don't want to participate. The school's job is to make schooling attractive in relation to what are perceived to be existing 'preferences'. Indeed,

Since a policy of multiculturalism prevails, low participation rates by ethnic groups need not be interpreted as being inequitable. They may be, but empirically one cannot separate choice from equity, or the lack of it. If one were to interpret lower participation rates as evidence of inequities when in fact they may be reflections of ethnic group values, then programs of compensation would de facto erode the distinctive values of the group in question and, by definition, be discriminatory.⁴

At this point, the education system abdicates any social project other than to maintain differences of inequity and label them, ex post facto, 'preferences'.

But in another twist, Williams points to over-representation of immigrant groups of non-English-speaking background in post-compulsory education. Consistent with his overall
argument, this seems merely to indicate a stronger 'cultural' preference.\textsuperscript{5}

This generalisation falters, however, at a number of key points. First, the sample consists mainly of children whose families are of Greek or Italian origin, and not recent groups such as of Vietnamese, Lebanese or Turkish origin. As we will show later in this paper, aggregation of specific ethnic groups and generalising about the 'ethnics' can mask, on the one hand, an uneven distribution between ethnic groups in which some groups achieve academically less well than others and, on the other hand, patterns of differentiation within ethnic groups resulting from factors of socio-economic positioning. Indeed, it seems that certain strata of some longer-established groups of non-English-speaking background are performing well at school, whilst other, particularly more recent immigrant groups, display a distinct pattern of under-achievement. Second, amongst longer-established NESB groups there is a greater proportion of Australian-born English mother tongue and bilingual students than amongst more recent immigrant groups. Third, the statistics on students finishing school in the early eighties need not tell us anything about the present school situation, in which 'diversified' curriculum reduces students' options in terms of formal academic credentialling (with curriculum forms and expectations polarising between schools in different socio-economic contexts) and in which the economic situation and prospects of social mobility of newly arrived families are much bleaker than they were for the immigrants of the fifties and sixties. Fourth, the report itself does contain some evidence contrary to its own generalisation, namely, that language difficulties of non-English-speaking background students are only compensated for by the great value placed on education, and that girls of non-English-speaking background seem to be participating less. But, this latter factor is claimed to be 'a reduction of advantage rather than an increase in disadvantage' [!]\textsuperscript{6}

Ethnic Achievement - Birrell

Birrell's paper 'The Educational Achievement of Non-English-speaking Background Students and the Politics of the Community Languages Movement', begins, in much the same vein as Williams, by linking the supposedly misguided assumption of educational disadvantage for groups of non-English-speaking background with a misallocation of resources into specialist programs, such as community language programs. The disadvantage argument, Birrell claims, was used by ethnic political lobby groups, but it is not based on any empirical reality. If there had been any initial problems associated with coming from a non-English-speaking background, the crisis is now over for the majority of immigrants because not only are most NESB students now born in Australia, but they are doing better in aggregate than Australians.\textsuperscript{7}
Birrell, in fact, wants to make a case for another group - working-class students of English-speaking background. This is now the most consistently disadvantaged group, and education policy and funding aiming at equity should target this group in preference to promoting community languages. Birrell over-simplifies this division. In fact, working-class/ethnics is not an either/or opposition. Class and ethnicity intersect, often in such a way that factors of ethnicity compound educational difficulties relating to class.

How does Birrell locate the rise of specialist educational servicing? In general terms, he aligns the special educational arrangements for NESB students with ALP policy, anxious to placate the 'ethnic' lobby group and based on a misguided theory of disadvantage. It needs to be pointed out in order to moderate his persistent attacks on the ALP, however, and to set the historical record straight, that much of the current direction of multicultural policy was shaped during the period of the Fraser government and that 85% of 'multicultural' funding goes into English-language teaching. Indeed, ironically, some of Labor's instinctive political reactions in attempting to dismantle multicultural education are the same as Birrell's: that the working-class are those really in need and that 'ethnics' need no special treatment.

Birrell goes on to argue with the cultural deficit model of disadvantage which has not only been used (appropriately, in Birrell's view) as a basis for ESL teaching, but also in programs, such as community languages, aimed at bolstering self-esteem and identity through respect for aspects of cultural background such as language and cultural maintenance. He points out that identity and self-esteem are not necessarily enhanced by such strategies. Indeed he provides evidence which suggests that identity and self-esteem increase with success in the school system. For Birrell, the implication emerging from this is the positive value of assimilation. Although assimilation involves hardships, he does not think the process can or should be made easier.

Birrell neither accepts unequivocally the liberal democratic rights arguments about maintaining culture and language, nor the arguments about cognitive advantage associated with bilingualism. He suggests that the possible strengths of each argument are not sufficient to take away from resources that would otherwise go towards the enhancement of the core culture in Australia.

Viewing the statistics, Birrell admits that length of residence affects school performance and that there are temporarily lower levels of achievement. But, 'the experience of coming from a migrant background does not seem to cripple a student's educational progress', he concludes. There are problems associated with migration, but they fade with time.
This is underscored by the statistics on post-compulsory education. The groups that performed badly in the seventies data, particularly the Greeks and Italians, are now over-represented in the eighties in HSC participation. 'This achievement occurred despite the lower measured IQs and the lower socio-economic status of students of NES origin', he claims.11

It seems NESB students ignore the 'reality' of their low IQ levels and stay on at school to the bitter end. None of this leads Birrell to question IQ testing, which in reality measures school experience more than it measures the elusive phenomenon of natural 'ability', nor to problematise the sort of daily school experience these students suffer. Nor does he ask what makes NESB students less 'realistic'.

Moreover, Birrell's arguments rest upon a minority of the school population - those who make their way through the higher levels of post-compulsory education. So, a significant piece of evidence in his argument is ESB/NESB entry to Monash University in which NESB students are doing better proportionately to their numbers in the population at large. What about the majority of NESB (and ESB) students who do not? This is an issue we will return to later in this paper.

Birrell recognises the reality of hardship and discrimination. But because their retention rates to HSC are high, he infers that NESB students are not seriously disadvantaged by this experience. So, it seems, we should live with racism, so long as HSC participation appears equal. Indeed, 'if IQ is taken as a proxy for intelligence, and if the ideal is that students should be encouraged to perform to the best of their ability, then it is the low achieving but relatively "bright" Australians who deserve the extra funds and attention'.12

Yes, says Birrell, NESB students suffer and there are traumas of transition. But, 'whatever the problems of cultural adjustment, it is possible that migrant children have more resilience and better modes of dealing with these challenges than identity theory postulates'.13 Maybe this same view of the world could be used to reduce the welfare state further, by removing state assistance to disabled people or scientists so they too could develop greater resilience and modes of dealing with the daily challenges they face.

Real advantage, Birrell concludes, comes from being of NESB. This is evidenced not only in HSC participation but by qualifications and occupation. So, of the small proportion of the Australian population now gaining university degrees, people of Greek and Italian backgrounds are marginally over-represented. He does not refer, however, to unemployment figures where NESB youth are also over-represented.14
Family support and 'ethnic' valuing of education and upward mobility have meant that the challenges of migration have often been overcome. They have been competing with Australians who have generally lacked the same intensity of parental support or protection from distracting influences, notably peer youth culture. The schizophrenia involved in living in two worlds is also no problem because 'the private ethnic world of family, community and religion seems to be readily compartmentalised from that of the Australian school without the trauma some have feared. It is almost as if such compartmentalisation is a virtue. Apart from ignoring the personal tensions for NESB people which cannot be entirely positive, there is a more general social issue. The supposedly impoverished culture of many Australian homes and schools, exhibiting alienation, individualism and cultural decentred-ness, might well have been enriched by a society moving towards multiculturalism, rather than arguments like Birrell's that simply pit the interest of one group against another.

Anglo-Australians: The New Self-Deprived - Bullivant

In a by now rather familiar move, Bullivant begins by challenging the conventional wisdom about the educational disadvantage of NESB children. Indeed, in his detailed ethnographic survey of six Melbourne schools, Bullivant claims to have found evidence of over-achievement by NESB students, attributable to the 'migrant drive' and the 'ethnic work ethic'. His research purportedly found little evidence of discrimination, despite there only being a limited emphasis on multicultural education. In terms of educational achievement, 'ethnic' students showed a preference for staying at school for the HSC, despite the fact that their teachers often didn't think they would make it. In contrast, Anglo-Australians seemed to emerge as the 'new self-deprived'.

Stereotyping did appear to be going on and there were complaints of racism and sexism. Although Bullivant claimed that his research was not fine-grained enough to assess the significance of this, he nevertheless managed to conclude that it was not a deterrent or a handicap. In fact, it might even be an element towards an explanation of NESB educational achievement. He also concluded, however, that Anglo-Australians are prejudiced against Asians and NESB students for their work ethic, and notes prejudice in the other direction, too, as a corollary.

The quality of this experience surely does not disprove the validity of special-purpose education programs. Bullivant's evidence, despite his finding that NESB students suffer no relative disadvantage measured in academic performance, simply underlines the importance of a rejuvenated and redirected socio-cultural dimension of multicultural education. School experience cannot only be measured in terms of academic results. What
happens if social tensions emerge, including even a problem of poorly motivated, 'self-deprived Anglos' and inter-cultural tensions centred around the motivation to succeed? Rather ironically, Bullivant's last word is that the more 'ethnics' assimilate to Australian values/culture, the more they start to approach the norm in terms of work values and academic performance! Does this mean that they, too can learn to be self-deprived?

Destroying the Myth of Second Generation Australians' Educational Under-Achievement - Mistilis

By this point, the key features of the arguments of the new educational critics are becoming predictable. Mistilis begins by discussing the supposed myth of ethnic disadvantage which she will subsequently attempt to demystify. The 'left', she claims, has traditionally argued that the migration experience produces 'stunting', linguistic deficiencies and 'low educational attainment' for NESB students. Even the second generation's performance is supposed to be determined by their parents' context. On the contrary, her evidence from the 1981 census shows that 'in respect of tertiary education qualifications, all second-generation origin sub-groups had a rate similar to or higher than [third and subsequent generation Australian-born], and that the second generation is not disadvantaged'. Differentiation by gender also shows that 'most women of NES origins are not disadvantaged'. So, she concludes

The notion that structural and institutional factors in society, the migration experience and personal characteristics of the second generation pre-determine their (low) occupational class position or militate against reasonable educational progress for those of NES origins is not supported in the light of the findings of this paper.

In her conclusion Mistilis laments that given how successful they are in educational terms, NESB people are not adequately represented in public office.

Conclusion: The Critics of Multicultural Education and the Question of Culture

Mistilis does not go so far as to ascribe a cause to the statistical phenomenon she describes. But the other three writers we have discussed here make a definite causal presumption. The presumption, for all three, is that school achievement is not a product of social structure and the institution of schooling, but 'cultural' factors principally to be located in the dynamics of the family.

Williams, for example, argues that 'social status' is the only factor that seriously restricts participation, but that it does not restrict access. Given equality of opportunity, the problem lies in working class preferences. These preferences 'reside in both families and
students. Responsibility here is shifted onto the victim, in a variant of the cultural pathology model of social disadvantage (analogous to Moynihan's 'pathological black family' line of reasoning). The most the school can do is diversify curriculum to make schooling more attractive to disadvantaged students. In fact, this cultural mode of argumentation in which curriculum is diversified in order to increase retention rates, is a distorted perspective on a social-structural reality in which retention-rates are increasing the result of youth unemployment. Curriculum, in response to this, is diversifying as a logistical necessity. It is not being diversified in order to increase retention rates for any profound educational reasons but as a reactive holding-job in difficult economic circumstances.

On the question of ethnicity and education, Williams, Bullivant and Birrell all use a cultural pathology model to explain educational success or lack of success, even if their results are the reverse of what one would expect. For example, Bullivant speaks of the 'migrant drive' and the 'ethnic work ethic' on the one hand, and 'self-deprivation' on the other, clearly ascribing school achievement to familial-cultural factors rather than institutional educational factors. Similarly, Birrell views the problem in terms of a lack or a surfeit of 'family discipline', 'ethnic pride' and 'social values'. Aside from the problem of the simplistic reversal of NESB/ESB, educational disadvantage/advantage equations which we will analyse in the next section of this paper, our point here is that the mode of analysis is narrowly cultural rather than social-structural. In other words, these analyses are based on a theory which locates the roots of social access in the familial-cultural rather than the school system and structural socio-economic relations. The victims and the successes of the education system have their own cultural pathology to blame or thank. In other words the school system has a limited role or no role to play in bringing about social equity. This theoretical consequence is entirely consistent with the explicit political thrust of these analyses: that educational programs aiming to right supposed disadvantage are inappropriate and ineffective.

**CONTRARY EVIDENCE**

There is nothing unexpected or original in what the new educational critics are saying: that there is considerable intergenerational mobility for NESB children through education. This is predictable in the context of the migration process and the long post-war boom. Moreover, many progressivist educational programs centring on cultural identity are indeed problematic. But there is a sophisticated debate on this subject going on within the ranks of those who support multicultural education. And socio-economic positioning is a
very important determinant of educational success. This, we know, is a truism. The message, however, of the new critics that there is no longer a role for multicultural education is very dangerous, even if it is a handy rationale for funding cutbacks. We will now discuss contrary evidence. This clearly shows that forty years of mass immigration have produced an educational situation fraught with problems and complexity.

1. EDUCATIONAL ADVANTAGE/DISADVANTAGE IS DISTRIBUTED UNEVENLY BETWEEN ETHNIC GROUPS

Uneven distribution of performance is considered by Williams, Bullivant and Birrell to indicate that 'ethnicity' is a general factor which predicates educational success. This over-simplifies and distorts a complex situation. Whilst some NESB groups appear to be doing well in terms of educational performance and intergenerational mobility, and on average NESB students on some measures can be shown to be doing as well or better than their ESB counterparts, other groups are doing very poorly. A sample based on some major well established ethnic groups (such as Williams') can seriously misrepresent the situation. His results do not at all mean that generalisations about 'ethnicity' can be made. An interesting example of this problem of uneven distribution is Barbara Horvarth's disaggregation of NSW Department of Education statistics which, purportedly, showed no average NESB disadvantage measured in class placement in streamed schools. In fact, re-working the same statistics, she showed that, although some NESB groups (such as those of Greek background) seemed to be performing better than average, others were performing significantly worse (for example those of Aboriginal, Maltese and Lebanese background). Similarly, Hugo's recent analysis of the 1981 census statistics shows overall intergenerational upward mobility for migrants, comparing first and second generation educational qualifications. Nevertheless, although second generation immigrants of Asian (14.0%) and Polish (13.3%) background have almost twice the probability of second generation Australian born (7.8%) of having educational qualification of diploma or better, the figures are only 2.3% for those of Maltese background and 5.3% for those of Italian background. Recent research by the Inner London Education Authority shows a similar uneven distribution in which, to varying degrees, African, Asian, Indian, Greek, Pakistani and SE Asian background groups perform better than average in end-of-school examinations than their ESB peers. On the other hand, Turkish, Caribbean and particularly Bangladeshi pupils performed worse. It is critical, however, that this phenomenon of uneven distribution is not put down to cultural pathology, but to the complex overlay of class (homeland and immigrant) and ethnicity, in which, in all probability, class is the more critical variable, albeit frequently expressed through cultural-ethnic identity and aspirations.
2. WE SIMPLY DO NOT HAVE ADEQUATE STATISTICS TO GENERALISE ABOUT NESB AS AN ENABLING/DISABLING FACTOR. CONSIDERABLE EVIDENCE SUGGESTS, HOWEVER, THAT NESB IS A FACTOR WHICH FREQUENTLY LEADS TO EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE.

Notwithstanding the serious difficulty of uneven distribution, for every statistic and every claim that NESB students in aggregate are doing well, and that there is therefore no special 'ethnic' problem in education, there are counter-claims and counter-statistics. Indeed, even some aggregated NESB figures often show the opposite to what the new educational critics claim to be the case. So, for example, the NSW Department of Education class placement study shows that far fewer NESB students make it into selective high schools. To take just two examples of a phenomenon which this survey showed to be true of all Sydney selective schools, the selective Fort Street High School has 40.5% of its students of NESB, whilst the contiguous general high schools average 63.8%. The selective Sydney Boys High has 22.8% and Sydney Girls High 16.9%, whilst contiguous general high schools have a staggering 64.3% of NESB. Not only does this say a lot about the effects of the school system on NESB students. It also throws into serious question the impact on NESB students of the 'aptitude' tests which determine placement in selective schools. Our problem now is not to pit statistics against statistics. The truth is that we do not have adequate statistics on school achievement (not retention rates, which are very problematic, as we will argue below) to be able to make valid generalisations. Until researchers have access to results comparable across the educational system (such as School Certificate moderator spreads correlated with census data or HSC results disaggregated by ethnicity), we can only conclude from some fragmentary evidence that a few NESB students are doing well and a lot are doing badly.

3. INTERGENERATIONAL MOBILITY THROUGH EDUCATION DOES NOT COMPENSATE FOR FIRST GENERATION DISADVANTAGE.

Even if there is some intergenerational mobility through education in some cases, the picture for the first generation is almost universally bleak. Birrell, for example, is willing to admit this, but argues that second generation success compensates for first generation disadvantage. Despite Birrell's resignation, the education system could make an impact on all these groups to bring them towards the figures for second generation Australian born, even adult migrants for whom English learning and higher education are no less important needs than they are for the rest of the population. The first generation, it should also be remembered, includes those who migrated as babies and those who entered the Australian school system mid-stream, as well as adults. Against the Australian-born figure of 7.9%, 2.8% of first
generation people from the Middle East have an educational qualification of diploma or better, 1.4% of Greeks, 1.6% of Yugoslavs, and 1.5% of Maltese, to give just a few examples. The situation is even worse when we consider that many of these would be overseas qualifications not adequately recognised in Australia or not updated to meet the requirements of Australian conditions. No amount of second generation mobility can compensate for this first generation experience. Added to this, first generation immigrants are the group with the fastest growing unemployment as the traditional areas of unskilled work in secondary industry are those most seriously affected by the current economic restructuring. With inadequate English, first generation immigrants have inadequate access to meagre training resources.

4. NESB STUDENTS’ MOBILITY PATTERNS IN EDUCATION ARE IN PART THE LONG-TERM RESULT OF THE POST-WAR BOOM. THESE DO NOT NECESSARILY CONTINUE THOUGH THE RECESSION PERIOD OF THE SEVENTIES AND EIGHTIES.

In the seventies and eighties, evidence shows that the trend to NESB upward mobility is being reversed. The immigrant families of the fifties and sixties did achieve considerable economic and social mobility, principally through the secondary labour market. The relative success of some of their children at school attests to this. But, in the economic circumstances of the late seventies and eighties, there is no certainty that the same mobility will occur for more recent immigrants, even in the long-term. Not only are there economic indicators which point to this, but this might well be a factor which could go some of the way to explain the uneven distribution of levels of educational achievement among NESB groups. Recent curriculum changes seem only to be compounding this situation. The demise of comprehensive curriculum, to be replaced by diversified, 'relevant' curriculum, means that a new streaming is emerging which now condemns even the few who might have succeeded in schools in poor socio-economic circumstances to the 'Veggie English' and macrame curriculum. The educational mobility of the fifties, sixties and early seventies was in part made possible by comprehensive curriculum. Diversified curriculum, on the other hand, reflects the 'holding job' schools now have in economic circumstances which, for those at the bottom of the ladder, are unlikely to improve in the foreseeable future. Parents' intuitive reaction to the social function of progressivist curriculum is surely based on some element of truth. A national poll conducted for the Australian Teachers' Federation showed that

* Private schools rated better than public schools.
* Most people would send their children to private schools if they could afford to.
Two-thirds of those polled said government primary schools were not meeting their needs because there was not enough teaching of fundamental skills.33

It is particularly clear that NESB parents in high NESB low socio-economic circumstances perceive curriculum diversification to be a handicap to their children. They frequently go to extraordinary lengths to finance their children through a private school education.

5. HIGH RATES OF SCHOOL RETENTION FOR NESB STUDENTS DO NOT NECESSARILY IMPLY SCHOOL SUCCESS.

All the evidence points to the fact NESB parents have high aspirations for their children.34 This is a phenomenon integral to the migration process itself. But the subsequent high retention rates in post-compulsory education do not necessarily imply school success. So, 7.8% of the second generation Australian-born have achieved an educational qualification of diploma or better, and 3.4% of those over 15-years of age are still at school. But for second generation people of Greek background a comparable 7.2% hold these qualifications, even though 24.3% are still at school. For Italians, the figures are 5.3% and 15.4% respectively.35 Even taking demographic spread into account, we are simply not seeing final results which in any way correspond to the school retention rates for these particular groups. To take one particular example, a newspaper report on Marrickville High School, a very high NESB density, low socio-economic context school in Sydney's inner west, tells how 74% of senior students go on to senior school against a national average of 49%. The principal explained that 'migrant families generally want a lot of their children, and they see education as a key to these things'.36 Yet this school has one of the poorest results in New South Wales measured by HSC scores and university entrance.

Retention, moreover, is not simply a function either of school success or aspirations. As we argued earlier, retention is more a function of levels of youth unemployment than any new success on the part of the education system. Furthermore, despite the distortions produced by using school retention rates as evidence of NESB success, these rates are dramatically variable in ways that happen to coincide with the class and ethnic context of a school. The 'survival ratio' of Year 9 to Year 12 entry is 13% at Francis Greenway High, 14% at Mount Druitt High and 15% at Shavery High. On the other hand, the ratio is 97% at Randwick Boys High and 93% at Mosman High.37 None of these are selective schools. For the schools with poor survival ratios, it happens that NESB and working class demographic context substantially overlap.
6. THOSE STUDENTS OF NESB WHO SUCCEED, DO SO AGAINST LONGER ODDS.

Even apart from the question of racism, which we will discuss in the next point, success for NESB students often reflects parental pressure and a high degree of motivation, against longer odds than ESB students. The Campbell Review of ESL paints a depressing picture, especially for NESB students, even those Australian-born, as they enter the senior school. They have to fight against their supposed IQs, and those who 'self-select' academic success through dogged determination more often than not do so across the maths/science nexus, being somewhat less hampered in these subjects by their language difficulties. Of course, commentators like Birrell and Bullivant recognise this, but simply consider success against longer odds to be a virtue. Not only is this rather callous, but it ignores those who, unjustly, do not manage to succeed.

7. RACISM IS STILL A SERIOUS PROBLEM IN SCHOOLS.

NESB students face racism in their school experience, both structural racism in the 'coincidence' of high NESB population density, socio-economic context and alternative school curriculum, and high levels of attitudinal racism, albeit frequently in subtle forms which produce ghettoisation. One student sums it all up, in a report by Henry and Edwards. 'A lot of people are going through hell because of their background.'

On the other hand, the perceived motivation and relative success of a few NESB students, against long odds, produces an apartheid of sentiment in schools, with longer-established ESB students expressing bitter resentment and NESB students expressing a degree of cultural contempt for their ESB peers. The seriousness of this situation in a society that has relied so heavily on mass immigration, cannot be overestimated. Racism is not simply a problem of 'migrant disadvantage'. Moreover, a spaghetti and polka multiculturalism, aiming to produce 'inter-cultural understanding', is not only counter-productive in constructing cultural stereotypes, but misrepresents students' fundamental concerns with bread and butter issues of education and employment. Racism is not a gratuitous slandering of cultural phenomena. It is a bitter misapprehension of deeper lines of social division.

8. GENERALISATION ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE OF ETHNIC GROUPS IGNORES THE FACT THAT THEY THEMSELVES ARE DEEPLY DIVIDED SOCIO-ECONOMICALLY AND BY SCHOOL PERFORMANCE. EVEN IF ONE SMALL STRATUM APPEARS TO BE SUCCEEDING, THE MAJORITY IS NOT.

Even if we accept the statistics that some NESB groups are doing well in education relative to the ESB population, this generalisation refers only to a very small minority
of each group. So what if 7.2% of second generation people of Greek background with a qualification of diploma or better compares favourably with the 7.8% of their ESB counterparts, or the 5.3% of second generation people of Italian background? What about the remaining 90+%? Parity of performance does not mean there is no project for multicultural education. Indeed, the dismal non-performance either in absolute terms or relative to aspirations, is a cause for great concern. As a preface our elaboration of this point, we should note that by western world standards, Australia's educational performance is very poor. It ranks lowest amongst OECD countries in public expenditure on education: 5.8% of GDP compared to Sweden's 9.1%, for example. This is even significantly lower than the USA's public expenditure with its extensive private university and school system. When we put together the facts that Australia is simply being left behind in the high-tech stakes and that Australia has had the largest immigration program of any country (bar the peculiar case of Israel) in the post-war period relative to its population base point, the situation is nothing short of disastrous. The old reserve army of unskilled immigrant labour is no longer needed. We could have an economic and social calamity on our hands within a few years.

To concretise the situation for the 70% of ESB and second generation NESB people with no post-school educational qualifications, the reasons for this in each case are very different. Certain aspects of ESB working-class culture, education and structural context, portend limited education. The reasons for limited education for NESB students are very different to ESB working class groups: language learning context, racism, the particular non-commensurability of family culture and the culture of educational success, and so on. This is not to deny that the powerful common factor of social class is at play both for ESB and NESB groups. But, critically, for NESB groups, issues of ethnicity and class compound in complex and specific ways. Generalisations based on university entrance which make conclusions about 'Greek' educational success, for example, aggregate a group which is significantly class-divided. Nor, certainly, can such 'findings' be taken to imply that we can forget about the special needs of the vast majority of school students of Greek background. No simple generalisations can be made from comparative, aggregated results. A complex variety of factors compound educational disadvantage.

9. GENDER FURTHER COMPLICATES THE ETHNICITY-CLASS RELATIONSHIP.

There is a great deal of evidence of sexism in education. This is an especially acute problem both for many NESB girls and their male peers, particularly given the ambiguity of non-sexist education policy and the ethnic cultural maintenance
strategies that have been an aspect of multiculturalism. Many cultures, including the dominant culture, integrally include sexism. In terms of academic performance, there is also considerable evidence that the aspiration-performance gap for NESB girls is particularly great.

10. IN THE MIDDLE RANGE OF EDUCATION - TECHNICAL AND TRADES QUALIFICATIONS - NESB STUDENTS ARE UNDER-REPRESENTED. AT THE SAME TIME, NESB YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT IS HIGH.

TAFE participation of NESB students has been shown to be poor. On the other hand, in what is surely a corollary to this, for some NESB groups, very high rates of unemployment are in evidence. So, even though a larger than average minority of Asians are gaining higher educational qualifications, 16.9% are unemployed (twice the national average), including 40.6% of Vietnamese. As well as uneven distribution between ethnic groups, we are clearly seeing here an uneven distribution within groups. This situation is probably even worse than the unemployment statistics reveal, given the particular problem of hidden unemployment in some NESB groups. This unemployment situation also explains, to a significant degree, high NESB school retention rates.

11. REFUGEES HAVE SPECIFIC NEEDS THAT REQUIRE SPECIAL SERVICING.

Australia supports an on-going refugee program. The long-term experience of some immigrants, those families who came during the economic boom and who happened to succeed, should not be projected upon the refugees arriving in the mid eighties. Their special educational needs are great, and the task is urgent if Australia is going to gain from their arrival, rather than simply import a problem.

REVITALISING MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

This paper has attempted to present a case for the need for a rejuvenated multicultural education, against the partial evidence (in both senses) of the new educational critics. We have also alluded to some of the problems of progressivist and multicultural curriculum. It is to this question - of analysing multicultural education practice to date and forging concrete ways forward, that we now briefly turn.

Both Birrell and Bullivant include critical commentary on multicultural education. Birrell questions the psychological assumption that fostering ethnic identity and cultural maintenance through education produces increased school achievement. He points, on the contrary, to the success of Chinese, Japanese and Jewish students in the American education system, despite the explicit assimilationist or 'Americanising' values that have
dominated the US school system. The link of cultural identity and self-esteem to educational achievement is, indeed, unproved. In fact, self-esteem might well be more a consequence of achievement in mainstream social and educational terms. Moreover, Birrell's fundamental concern with social access rather than cultural maintenance as a priority of the school system, is not misplaced. But his explicit advocacy of assimilation necessarily would involve a revival of racist assumptions about superiority/inferiority and the alienation of culturally 'different' students, which excludes in reality whilst assimilating in appearance. Multiculturalism and social equity are not mutually exclusive goals, as Birrell implies.

Similarly, Bullivant notes the ineffectiveness of multicultural education in some of the schools he surveyed, despite evidence of racism. He comments:

>a curriculum that is unduly weighted with a selection of the expressive aspects from the cultural stock, and stresses life styles may not provide young people with sufficient instrumental survival knowledge to compete for life chances when they leave school ... . Equipping children with a surfeit, say, of ethnic community languages, history and music in an attempt to improve their cultural awareness, maybe of far less survival value in the final analysis than mathematics, skills in using computers and accountancy.

But this as it may, we strongly oppose Birrell's and Bullivant's implication that no multicultural education is needed. Rather, multicultural education needs to be strengthened to include a more powerful equity component. As their 'no-program' perspective fits well with their 'no problem' analysis of the situation of NESB students, so our perspective of equitable multiculturalism is founded on an analysis of the serious, complex and on-going educational needs of both NESB and ESB students.

Suffice to say, the old, pluralist multiculturalism, resting heavily on the presentation of different cultural identities, does not necessarily solve the problem. Indeed, it often creates many more problems than it solves. Our concern is that a two-pronged multiculturalism emerges from the wreckage of the failure of progressivist, 'diversified, culturally relevant' curriculum, weakened further, beyond its own inherent limitations, by fiscal cutbacks. This multiculturalism should:

i) aim at social equity through multicultural curriculum strategies, and
ii) tackle the pressing problem of racism directly.

Drawing on work in which we have already extensively argued this case, we would contend that multicultural education needs to move beyond a simple pluralist model which
is very vulnerable to attack in the current political and economic context. Whilst appreciating a great deal of validity in many of the propositions of pluralist multiculturalism and respecting its historic contribution in the general development of multiculturalism in education in Australia, we want to argue for an equitable multiculturalism. Educators have a duty to build upon the positive achievements of pluralist multiculturalism in order to make multiculturalism a stronger and more demonstrably effective and efficient process in schools. It is time to move on. Indeed we would like to suggest there are positive indications that we are moving on.

In the area of language learning, for example, the move to equitable multiculturalism would, in the spirit of the National Policy on Languages, involve a move away from short-term, poorly funded programs with narrow rationales. Rather than limited programs which aim no more than to raise students' self-esteem as a gesture to the 'community', the teaching of languages other than English would have to have serious long-term cognitive and socio-economic rationales, as important in so-called 'community' language teaching as they are in traditional 'foreign' language teaching. In the socio-cultural field, multicultural education would be more than a celebration of the colourful differences of spaghetti and polka. Rather, it would examine fundamental issues of cultural interaction, rights, equity and cultural becoming for all students. And to give a third example, renewing equity as a priority for multiculturalism would not necessarily mean diversified 'culturally appropriate' multiculturalism in which the 'ethnics' in poor socio-economic circumstances were given frequently trivial forms of multicultural education and the middle class continued to receive traditional academic curriculum. Equitable multiculturalism would require both the mainstreaming of multiculturalism through all traditional curriculum areas and differential educational strategies to singular social ends: participation and access for all students.

By focussing attention on some of the failures and the inappropriateness of simplistic pluralistic multiculturalism as it has often been applied, to the new critics of multicultural education make some worthwhile points. But the arguments on which they build are inadequate for the strong conclusions they reach. The positions they advocate do not follow logically from their data. Questions need to be asked about their purposes - or at least the real effects of their arguments. To argue, in effect, for a return to a primarily assimilative curriculum, as they do, simply neglects the fact that different educational strategies are needed for different groups of students. These different strategies are required to ensure equitable social access. Despite the arguments of these educational critics, the situation of NESB students in the education system is far from satisfactory. Too few succeed; too many of those that do do so at great cost; and the entire enterprise conceals significant,
predictable and serious inequities. The intellectually and culturally enriching potential of a cultural pluralism which promotes equitable access must be strengthened rather than abandoned.

We particularly wish to thank Joe Lo Bianco, Stephen Castles and Michael Morrissey for the comments they made on this paper.


2 Ibid, pp.113-114

3 Ibid, pp.115-116

4 Ibid, p.16

5 Ibid, pp.70-71

6 Ibid, pp.70-71, 71-72


9 Ibid, p.4.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid, p.10.


14 AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF MULTICULTURAL AFFAIRS, Reducing the Risk: Unemployed Youth and Labour Market Programs, AIMA, Melbourne.


18 Ibid, pp.16-17.


22 Ibid, p.23.

23 Ibid, p.27.


29 INNER LONDON EDUCATION AUTHORITY EDUCATION COMMITTEE< 'Ethnic Background and Examination Results', *Mimeo*, 1987.


