

*Diversities in education:  
Effective ways to reach  
all learners*

**David Mitchell**

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The primary aim of *Diversities* is to help educators to become more effective in teaching diverse learners, thus contributing to more peaceful and equitable societies based on mutual respect and tolerance.

The book covers five major categories of difference of relevance to education: sex/gender; social class/socio-economic status; race/ethnicity/culture; beliefs/religion; and disabilities. As well, brief mention is made of age and family structures.

By drawing attention to cutting-edge research into effective educational policies and practices in the education of diverse learners, *Diversities* will go some way towards helping to bridge the growing gap between research and practice.

Multiple factors lead to differences among human beings. Among those discussed in the book are: evolution, globalization, poverty, geographic location, genetics, neuroscience, environmental degradation, cultural values, conflict, disasters, socialization, politics, economic theories, technology, resources, diet, xenophobia, and education.

Some of the questions covered include:

- Why should we value diversity and human rights?
- How can inclusive education accommodate to diversity?
- How similar or different are people who occupy certain categories of difference?
- Given that individuals hold multiple identities, sometimes nested one within another, how do differences interact with each other?
- How does society's aspirations for social cohesion and social harmony impact on people who are different?
- What meanings are ascribed to differences – cross-culturally, historically?
- With reference to each domain of difference, should educators seek to (a) accentuate it, (b) eliminate or reduce it, or (c) ignore it?

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For my family in all its diversity:

Jill

Grant, Mina, Kiki, Conrad, Zenji and Titus

Janet, Bevan, Ayaka and Tane

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## **Preface**

I am different; I am unique; I am different today from yesterday and will be different tomorrow. I have a unique set of markers comprising my identity. Let me outline who I am or, at least, how I see myself:

*I am a white, heterosexual male in my mid 70s who, since my adolescence, has been an atheist, although I do recognize that many of my values are derived from the Christian-Judeo tradition of my society, overlaid by Enlightenment advances in knowledge. I am a fourth generation New Zealander, tracing my ancestry to England, Scotland and Germany. I was brought up in a nuclear family with one younger brother and formed a nuclear family with my wife and two children. My daughter is married to a man from a Maori background and my son to a Japanese woman; both have nuclear families. My daughter's two children are learning French and Japanese, respectively, while my son's four children are bilingual in Japanese and English. As a young person, I was proficient, but not outstanding in various sports. I have Type 2 diabetes, which is controlled by insulin, but otherwise keep good health. I am of above average intelligence, but fall short of being a genius. My personality tends towards introversion, rather than extroversion, and I have never been in trouble with the law. Much of my identity comes from being an academic and my family and friends, perhaps justifiably, describe me as a 'workaholic'. In class terms, I am probably upper middle class, having transitioned from a working class background through my accessing of higher education. I was an early adopter of technology and find accessing the internet to be essential for my academic work, including the writing of this book. I count myself fortunate to have been brought up in a democratic society that is committed to the rule of law and social justice. I have also been fortunate that none of my identity markers have led to any form of discrimination or marginalization. Sadly, I know that this is not the case with many people who will be the focus of my book.*

Inevitably, my identity will influence the way in which I approach the task of writing this book, but I shall do my best not to let it bias or distort my analysis. I will leave it to you, my reader, to determine how successful I am in this endeavour. On the other hand, I appreciate that you, too, will bring to this book your own background and value systems and, dare I say it, biases.

While I undoubtedly share some of my identity markers with you, it is extremely unlikely that I share them all with you or any other person on the planet. And the same is true for you: we are both unique creatures. Some of our differences are immutable (e.g. our age and eye colour), while others can be changed (e.g. our socio-economic status, our family structure, our political context). Children's options are rather more limited than adults as they usually subscribe to their parents'/caregivers' circumstances.

We live in increasingly diverse societies and you, as an educator, need to be able to respond appropriately and sensitively to this diversity. Your challenge is threefold: With reference to each

domain of difference, should you seek to (a) celebrate and accentuate it, (b) eliminate or reduce it, or (c) tolerate or ignore it?

Elsewhere, I have presented a personal manifesto that underpins my approach to education. I think you should be aware of this, too, when evaluating the recommendations I present in this book.

*I recognize that, from the moment of their birth, human beings actively process the world about them and find patterns and meaning in their experiences. Thus, they come to learn the language of their cultures, and the appropriate social rules and roles. They learn to walk, to run, and to engage in complex interactions and games with their family and friends. They learn to be creative, to make new things and to work out new ways of solving problems. In short, human beings are natural learners.*

*I recognize that children's parents, siblings, friends and teachers mediate some of this learning, but much of it is independent and self-regulated. Much of it is spontaneous and occurs through observation and trial and error. I recognize that notwithstanding this common drive to learn, there is considerable variation among individuals in what and how they learn. Some of this diversity reflects variations in their biological structures and functions, while some reflects variations in their cultural experiences and such factors as exposure to the trauma of wars, conflicts, natural disasters, inadequate diet, abuse, and poor living conditions.*

*I recognize, however, that much of the diversity among individuals reflects the fact that human beings are unique in their individual learning styles, motivation, interests and experiences. I affirm that, irrespective of such diversity, all individuals can and do learn and are capable of having that learning extended and enriched by education. I recognize that all children have a right to receive a quality education appropriate to their needs.*

*I affirm that it is the school's task to enhance children's natural proclivity for learning. This means that educators should respect children as active constructors of knowledge and, by-and-large, as being capable of driving their own learning. I affirm that educators should adopt a child-centred, whole-child approach in their teaching that recognizes the importance of achieving creativity and emotional goals, as well as cognitive goals.*

*And, finally, I affirm that educators should see as one of their primary responsibilities, the recognition and respect for human diversity, with the aim of improving the quality of life of all learners.<sup>1</sup>*

In writing the book, my primary aim is to help educators (practising and trainee teachers, principals, and the professionals who advise them, e.g., school psychologists) to become more effective in teaching diverse learners. I hope that the book will go some way towards helping you to bridge the growing gap between research and practice. I hope, too, that it will help to familiarize you with some of the cutting-edge research on effective educational policies and practices that has been, and is being, carried out around the world in the education of diverse learners. My secondary aim in writing the book was to inform myself about a range of perspectives on diversity – cross-cultural, economic, historical, biological, evolution, etc.. As Benjamin Disraeli once said, 'The best way to become acquainted with a subject is to write a book about it.'

By now, you will have noted that I have chosen to write often in the first person, a somewhat unusual style for someone steeped in academic traditions! My reason for this is simply that I want to connect with you the reader on a personal level as far as it is possible via the printed word. In keeping with this commitment, I will be sharing my personal experiences with diversity as I grew up and some of my academic writing over the years. I have also done my best to write in clear English and avoid unnecessary jargon, but not to the extent of excluding technical explanations and terms when they are relevant.

Another point I would like to mention is my approach to referencing sources: I have attempted to minimize possible distractions by including them in notes at the ends of chapters, rather than in the body of the text. Unless you are seeking further information on the studies I have consulted or wanting technical information, you should be able to read the text without constantly referring to the endnotes.

Finally, let me introduce myself as a professional. I am David Mitchell, a New Zealander who has worked as a consultant in inclusive and special education in many countries. My education career commenced as a primary school teacher, with a particular focus on gifted and talented children, from which I moved to become an educational psychologist assisting educators to work with learners with special educational needs. This was in a community with a large number of Maori families, many of whom were socioeconomically disadvantaged. My next career step was to work in as a teacher educator in universities, mainly in New Zealand, but also as a visiting professor and as a UNESCO consultant in countries as diverse as USA, Canada, UK, Japan, Singapore, Kazakhstan, South Africa, Ethiopia, and Uzbekistan. My most recent publications (published with Routledge) include a four-volume series, *Special education needs and inclusive education* (2004), *Contextualizing inclusive education: Evaluating old and new international perspectives* (2005 and 2009), two editions of *What really works in special and inclusive education: Using evidence-based teaching strategies* (2008 and 2014), and a book I co-edited with Valerie Karr: *Crises, Conflict and Disability: Ensuring equality* (2014).

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<sup>i</sup> Mitchell, D. (2014). *What really works in special and inclusive education: Using evidence-based teaching strategies*. Second edition. Abingdon: Routledge, p.xv-xvi.

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