

## **Teaching Bosnian Students. A Focus on Intercultural Sensitivity**

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## **Teaching Bosnian students – a focus on intercultural sensitivity**

### **Abstract**

Effective teaching is founded on an understanding of the learner. Research (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996, McGroarty, 1993, Norton, 2000) has shown that one of the most important constituents of learner-personality is a learner's cultural background. In the attempt to get to know their learners best, teachers collect a range of diverse data including information on cultural background (national and ethnic self-perception and identification) and language spoken at home. However, there are students who originate from ethnically mixed homes and cannot determine their cultural background or do not wish to do so. In this paper, the cases of three Bosnian students are discussed in terms of their cultural identity perceptions and attitudes towards their host country and its culture. An example of miscommunication is analyzed between a teacher and a student and the type of information that could have assisted in improving the intercultural exchange is presented. The author attempts through this presentation to provide relevant Bosnia-specific information that might contribute to the enhancement of intercultural sensitivity or increased cultural awareness of teachers, social workers and other people who deal with Bosnians.

### **Background**

In order to create an environment that promotes learning, where students are part of a cohesive and supportive learning community, teachers need to have and display a range of attributes. Of particular importance are intercultural sensitivity, friendliness, caring for students' learning and caring about students as individuals (Ooka Pang, 2004). This paper focuses on one of the attributes mentioned above, on intercultural sensitivity. Adams (1995) described it as the recognition that cultural differences and similarities exist without assigning values to those differences. According to this author, the notion 'cultural awareness' goes a step further. It refers to the understanding of a specific ethnic group. Gaining cultural awareness might involve changing preconceived ideas, attitudes and values. Sensitivity and awareness lead to openness and flexibility that people develop in relation to others.

In addition to academic instruction, social-emotional learning takes place in classrooms. This happens in different ways for different students. Therefore, getting to know the students well is essential. Research (Liyanage, 2004) has found that cultural and ethnic background play a pivotal role in the way students view the world, feel about things that happen to them, mould their learning habits and select learning strategies. In other words, a national or regional culture provides educational and behavioural rules from how to dress or speak to different people up to understanding gender issues and ways of seeing the world generally. Condon (1973) calls culture a directive force on the individual, which offers 'correct' views that are distinct to those of the others. Queensland schools have a substantial number of students from Bosnia. Many who arrived in mid the 1990-s in Australia carry war traumas. One of the overt manifestations of the traumas is their mistrust, their hesitancy to reveal their cultural background and ethnic origin. This is not surprising, as in the Bosnian war belonging to the 'right ethnic group' was a matter of life or death. This paper attempts to inform teachers and other interested readers about important issues related to Bosnian culture and history that could provide a good departure point for a better intercultural communication.

### **Context of the project**

As part of a larger literacy development project, 15 Bosnian high school students who arrived in Australia under the Red Cross refugee scheme were interviewed. During the interviews students were hesitant to talk about their ethnic background and native language. Thirteen either avoided engagement about this topic or responded with the most neutral solution claiming that they were Yugoslavs and spoke Yugoslav (although there was no language that was called Yugoslav). Data from three of these interviews are used here with a special focus on the students' perceived ethnic identity and attitudes towards the host society and its language. The cases were selected because of the richness of their reports. All had a deep level of trauma, low level of English language skills and acculturation problems.

The three students were a 16 year-old boy and two girls (aged 14 and 15). They all came from ethnically mixed homes. All had spent a certain period of time in a Special School in which they gained basic English skills through intensive ESL support programs with the assistance of a Bosnian native-speaker as teacher aide. In addition, the School had organized special professional war trauma

counselling for them. Melissa (the students' names have been changed for protection of their anonymity) came from a Serbian and Croatian parental home. Prior to her arrival in Australia, she spent some time in a refugee camp in Hungary. Her parents split up in the refugee camp and she came to Australia with her mother and sister. She spent about 6 months in the Special School. Haso had an Albanian and Muslim parental background. He was extremely traumatized. He witnessed many atrocities including the killing of his father. He spent over a year in the Special School. Mara came from a Serbian and Muslim family background and left the Special School after three-months, joining the ESL support group of a state high school. The students were interviewed in their native language in the Special School two/three months after their arrival.

Immigration or dislocation inevitably implies an intensive nexus with another culture. Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) framework attempts to explain how people react to cultural difference. It emerged as a result of Bennett's observations that individuals react to cultural difference in predictable ways and become increasingly competent intercultural communicators after an extended period of confrontation with the other culture. This model comprises six stages that reflect the underlying cognitive orientation of individuals towards cultural difference. Bennett believes that education can be tailored to facilitate the development into the next stage based on predictions about students' behaviour and attitudes. The first three stages are ethnocentric and "own culture" is experienced as central to an individual's reality. These are Denial, Defense against cultural difference and Minimization of cultural differences. The second three are ethnorelative implying that "own culture" is one of many and it can be investigated in the context of other cultures. The stages are Acceptance, Adaptation and Integration of differences. In this project, Bennett's DMIS framework was utilized for the assessment of the students' perceptions on their culture and ethnicity and their attitudes towards the culture and language of the host country.

### **Intercultural sensitivity**

With the increasing numbers of multicultural classrooms, increasingly more teachers are expected to develop intercultural sensitivity and to successfully interculturally communicate. However few received guidance in recognising and growing the skills underpinning these attributes in their initial teacher training programs at Australian colleges and universities. The following dialogue is an exchange between Mara and one of her teachers. It illustrates gaps in the teacher's culturally relevant knowledge base. It also shows the teacher's persistence to generate responses to questions in the face of the student's obvious attempts to avoid engagement.

T. What is your cultural background?

S. ???

T. What are you? A Bosnian? A Serb, a Croat?

S. A former Yugoslav.

T. But Yugoslavia had different parts such as Serbia, Bosnia, Croatia, Slovenia.... From which part are you?

S. Bosnia.

T. Which language do you speak at home?

S. Serbocroatian.

T. Serbian or Croatian?

S. Serbocroatian.

T. (a bit irritated) What are your parents?

S. My mother is a Serb my father is a Muslim.

T. Muslim is not nationality it is a religion.

S. Ahhh....I don't know about that. He says he is a Muslim.

T. (another attempt by the teacher to clarify the situation) Which language does your father speak?

S. He calls it Bosnian, but we all, my mum, my father and my brothers, we all speak the same language'.

The transcript allows some inferencing about the teacher's knowledge base in her attempt to gather data on Mara's cultural/ethnic and linguistic background. For example, she displayed some knowledge about the former Yugoslavia. However, she did not appear to understand the complexity of bases underpinning Mara's responses beyond simple declarative information and the implications of these responses. She lacked the culture-specific knowledge schemas (Richards, 1989; Brown and Yule 1983) that may have assisted her toward a broader and more appropriate interpretation of the messages in this short dialogue.

Quite soon after this exchange, the teacher gave up the questioning and concluded that Mara did not really know what her cultural background was and could not clearly identify the language that

she spoke at home. Needless to say, such conclusions did not convey a positive picture about Mara's intellectual capabilities.

***Which knowledge schemas were needed for the interpretation of this dialogue?***

A closer look at the transcript suggests the need for clarification of the following questions: Why did the student avoid identifying herself ethnically? Who were those citizens in former Yugoslavia who called themselves Yugoslavs? Why has she called the language that the family speaks at home Serbocroatian and why has her father labelled the same language differently?

The basic purpose of any communication is to convey messages. This may happen through paralinguistic (body language, facial expressions) or linguistic means of communication (oral or written language that is represented through clauses). According to Halliday (1982), each clause carries all the meaning-choices that are possible for that clause within a particular culture. The range of choices actualized in the presented exchange and that might have assisted the teacher are illustrated below for the clause, "I am a former Yugoslav"

1. A genuine loyalty to the idea of Yugoslavhood,
2. An ethnically-mixed parental home and the student's attempt to avoid hurting the feelings of any of the parents with showing loyalty to the ethnic background of one parent only,
3. An anxiety based on bad experiences
4. A fear of negative evaluation based on the negative image of an ethnic group possibly projected through media presentations
5. A wish to remain ethnically neutral
6. A refusal to accept the loss of the former home country

Further data highlighted the significance of points 2 and 6 for the dialogue.

For clarification of the question: "Who were the people who identified themselves as Yugoslavs in the former Yugoslavia?" the following information might have been useful: 'Yugoslavia' was the name of a state that consisted of six republics. It changed its name several times, but before the Bosnian war between 1992 and 1995 it was known as the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia. One would expect that the citizens of Yugoslavia would call themselves Yugoslavs. However, just a small percentage of the citizens developed a sense of 'Yugoslavhood'. Despite the common Yugoslav passport, they preferred to call themselves Slovenes, Dalmatians, Croats, Serbs, Istrians etc. according to their geographic location (e.g. Istrians) or ethnic backgrounds (Slovenes, Croats). Besides the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina that is located in the north of Serbia, Bosnia (in the central part of the former Yugoslavia) was the most ethnically-colourful part of Yugoslavia. At these two locations were the largest numbers of people who originated from mixed parental homes and who called themselves Yugoslavs. This certainly does not exclude those people who genuinely adhered to the idea of Yugoslavhood.

The second student, Melissa, when asked about her cultural background, declared that she was a former Yugoslav who came from the former Yugoslav Republic of Bosnia. She perceived ethnicity and religious background as irrelevant. Neither Mara nor Melissa wanted to show disloyalty to either parent. They pointed out that in the country of their childhood, the communist ideology attributed no importance to any religion or ethnicity. According to Melissa, she developed a special loyalty at two levels: loyalty to the non-existing former Yugoslavia as her large home country – and to Bosnia as her small home country. At the time of the interview, Mara was in the phase of desperately searching for a space, a cultural refuge and saw Australia as her chance to settle down and belong to somewhere. She responded to the question: "What would you say if you were asked about your nationality?"

*I would say that I am in terms of nationality a nobody, because my mother is a Serb and my father a Muslim. This is.....ah...therefore I am a nothing. And my mother language is Serbocroatian.*

Haso identified himself as Bosnian (his parents are of Muslim and Albanian descent). It is common knowledge that ethnic belonging and native language are strongly interwoven. People who declare to be Bosnians (since the war in the 1990s only Muslims do so) call their language Bosnian. Haso's response with regard to the language he speaks was most unexpected. He said that his native language was Serbian. The reason for this might lie in the fact that he spent a few years in a camp in Montenegro where the language was called Serbian/Montenegrian.

The case of Haso is one of the many that illustrates that the constitution of the nation state of Bosnia caused a linguistic confusion among Bosnian citizens. Namely, many people in Bosnia or from Bosnia still do not know how to call the language they speak (please refer to Mara's interview). Up to the Bosnian war in the 1990s there was no language that would be called Bosnian. The three languages, Bosnian, Serbian and Croatian were called Serbocroatian or in Croatia Croatoserbian for a long period

of time (1944-1990). However as a result of the ethnic warfare and the recognition of the world community of the former Republics as separate nation states, the newly-emerged countries showed a strong tendency in developing their own language variety and make it as distinct from the formerly so called Serbocroatian language as possible. Old expressions, regional lexematic varieties and newly-coined words entered the systems of Croatian, Bosnian and Serbian and it is obvious that they are developing further in separate directions.

The linguistic situation would be very simple if linguistic borders and boundaries could be drawn and stop a language spreading over political borders. However this is not the case. The people in the Bosnian Serbian entity (Republika Srpska) do not call their language “Bosnian”, although their republic is located at the territory of the former Bosnian Republic. They state that they speak Serbian. In Hercegovina, the Croats call their language “Croatian” and not “Bosnian”. Only Muslims call their language “Bosnian” (e.g. Mara’s father). This may be the case due to the fact that the Serbs and the Croats have their ‘mother countries’ in the neighbourhood and therefore they developed split loyalty feelings for their small new country and their mother country, that the Muslims could not develop as they lack a ‘mother country’. In the short time since the recognition of the Bosnian nation state in 1995, the three ethnic entities have not yet developed feelings of belonging to the same nationhood, and judging by the political climate and the media reports at this point in time, it is questionable whether this will happen soon.

### **How to develop intercultural sensitivity?**

A range of strategies were used for developing a better understanding of the Bosnian students’ cultural, national and ethnic identity, attitudes and behaviour. These strategies and the gained insights are outlined below.

#### ***1. Learning about the students’ country, culture and history.***

Bosnians are under-represented in Australian migration studies. Until recently, data on Bosnians could be found only either in the category of Yugoslavs or in studies dealing with Southern Europeans. This is not surprising as Bosnians had until the Bosnian war (1992-1995) no separately-recognized nation or nation state status except for a short period of time in the Middle Ages (Mojzes, 1994).

Given the colourful multicultural makeup of Bosnia and the diversity of historic influences on the citizens throughout diverse historic periods of time, the notion of ‘Bosnian culture’ became extremely heterogeneous. It is arguable whether there exists a category that could be called Bosnian culture at all in the same way as in the multicultural Australia today the question of Australian culture has become more and more complex. The writer Ivo Andric (awarded with the Nobel Prize in 1961) delivered a most comprehensive description of this culture. (Interestingly, all three ethnic groups, the Serbs, the Croats and the Muslims, who lately prefer to be called Bosnjaks, claim that Ivo Andric is *their* writer). Andric’s work demonstrates that culture does not represent a homogeneous notion. There are sub-groups within a culture that express particular habits and ways of thought that show common features with the ‘general culture’, but also separate or even opposing features to others in the groups. Barrett (2001) described them as specific, non-transferable rituals and symbols. This suggests that it is necessary to distinguish between holistic culture, in which the patterns of behaviour are general throughout a nation and those that apply to sub-groups (that might emerge based on an either ethnic or social sub-division). In addition, it is inevitable that there are capabilities that are unique to self. Feldman (1980) claimed that the one’s way of thinking and organizing reality takes on a distinctive form made up of traditional and newly-gained forms. It seems that these ‘traditional forms’ can be related to the inherited, ethnically-distinct behavioural patterns that represent the main distinctive features between the Bosnian ethnic sub-groups. This might explain the labels “Bosnian Serbs”, “Hercegovinian Croats” and “Bosnian Muslims” or “Bosnjaks” as opposed to “Serbs” from Serbia and Montenegro, “Croats” from different parts of Croatia or “Muslims” who live in other countries (e.g. in Albania, in the Middle East and Central Asia and are of a non-Slavic origin).

Throughout its history, Bosnia was a melting pot of nations in the heart of Europe. It consists today of two entities called the Bosnian Croatian Federation and the Serbian Republic (Republika Srpska). It has three major ethnic groups, the Muslims (Bosnjaks), the Croats and the Serbs. The Bosnian “Muslims” officially gained recognition of their ethnicity status in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore the label “Muslim” does not mark religious belonging only, but ethnic status as well. It refers to a group of Slavic background people who converted to Islam in Medieval times while Bosnia was subjugated by the Ottoman Empire. There are also other minority groups in Bosnia such as Jews, Romas/Gypsies, Turks, Albanians and Hungarians.

Bosnia first belonged to Bosnian rulers, then to Serbs, Hungarians, the Ottoman Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Since 1918 it became a constitutive part of the Kingdom of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs later called the Yugoslav Kingdom. Since 1945 it was one of the six constitutive republics of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia. As an outcome of the Bosnian war from 1992-1995 it gained its statehood.

The central features of the traditional way of life in all these groups were: a collectivist society, a patriarchal family with strong ties to kinship. The individual's status was gained from the family. Women gained their social status from marriage. Many of the Bosnian refugees display nostalgia and the sense of a 'lost paradise' Dobrenov-Major (2004). The overt manifestation of these feelings was identified by Skrbis, (1994) as one of the common characteristics of a substantial number of Ex-Yugoslav migrants. The changes in Bosnia (the separation from Yugoslavia and its newly gained nation state status) impacted on the national and ethnic identity perceptions of most of the latest migrants. The importance of ethnic and religious identity grew during the war to incredible dimensions and many citizens of Bosnia re-defined their identities from a former Yugoslav to an orthodox Serb, a catholic Croat or a Bosnian Muslim. Of course in this process, mixed families faced an additional problem that was related to choosing which of the two ethnic backgrounds should prevail and guide their children in constructing their national, ethnic and religious identity. Many of these families broke apart under peer pressure, some even in a very tragic way (e.g. cases were repeatedly reported by the Yugoslav media during the war that fathers murdered their children as they were conceived with a woman of a 'wrong' ethnic background).

## ***2. Learning about Bosnian immigrants in Australia***

Former Yugoslav citizens came in different waves to Australia. In 1960-70s mainly rural people immigrated due to economic reasons, when they did not succeed in getting urban jobs in their home country (Nejasmic, 1990). With the deterioration of the economic, social and political situation in ex-Yugoslavia towards the end of 1980s, young urban professionals with knowledge of English came to Australia. Some of these people still nurture a sense of Yugoslavhood which is demonstrated through the existence of Yugoslav clubs such as the club called Unity (Jedinstvo – in Brisbane). In this club, people of all the six former Yugoslav Republics jointly maintain their fond memories on their lost home country, the former Yugoslavia. In the mid 1990s numerous refugees from all socio-economic groups (mainly families with ethnically-mixed marriages) arrived under the refugee scheme of the Red Cross in Australia. There are still Bosnians arriving in smaller numbers. These people are mainly double dislocated persons who spent already a substantial period of time in another Western country (e.g. in Germany or in one of the Scandinavian countries). As they have not succeeded in gaining citizenship or a permanent resident status in their host countries they chose to immigrate to other countries including Australia.

Australian schools generally label all the migrants who came from the geographic territory of Bosnia as Bosnians, but the question is, how do these people perceive themselves and do they want to be called so? Another issue is how much of the ethnocultural semiotics can be attributed to the ethnicity of these people and how much to a holistic 'Bosnian culture'? For now, there is no unified understanding of what Bosnian culture is. It is highly questionable whether there is a unified national image possible, given the heterogeneous nature of the Bosnian society. The fact is that Bosnian refugee Serbs who found refuge in Serbia and Montenegro can be clearly distinguished from the 'other' Serbs who have not lived in Bosnia. The main distinctive features are their language, communication style, food and eating habits. In the same way, Bosnian Croats can be distinguished from the Croats who live in different other parts of Croatia. This testifies to the existence of a common umbrella that embraced all three ethnicities, the Serbs, Croats and Muslims in Bosnia and made them in many ways similar and at the same time distinct from the other citizens of the former Yugoslavia. This umbrella might be called Bosnian culture. However it needs further investigation to establish what made this culture Bosnia specific and how it has changed as a result of the Bosnian war.

## ***3. Collecting data about the students' attitudes towards their new home country***

Additional data about the students' national identity perceptions and culture can be gained through questions related to their attitudes towards the host country and language and their perceptions of the cultural distance (Schumann, 1976) between their culture and the host culture. The responses received from Melissa show that she was in Defense stage on Bennett's DMIS scale at the time of the interview. She experienced her own culture as the only good one. She displayed a strong sense of boundary distinctiveness (Giles & Johnson, 1987), talking explicitly about 'us' and 'them'. Her responses were, as the following transcript shows, strongly coloured by her unpleasant experiences.

“Do you like to live here in Australia?”

*Not really. I haven't got that many friends as I did before, and I don't like it here, I thought Australia would be more beautiful. It is OK, but I don't like to live here as much as I did in X (the name of her town in Bosnia).*

Do you know some Australians? Have you any contact with people who are not from your country?

*Yes.*

What kind of people are they? Could you tell me more about this?

*They are different from our people.*

In which way?

*They are worse than our people, because when we spoke in the train in our language they said that we are stupid because we can't even speak English.*

Haso's responses reflected a positive attitude towards his immediate surrounding in relation to its natural, geographic and lifestyle characteristics. But they also showed his lack of opinion about Australians as he lived in isolation and had no contacts with people outside of his school. According to the DMIS scale, Haso was in Denial phase (that is characterised by avoidance of other cultures through maintaining psychological and physical isolation.).

*'I like the girls here. And in the shops you can buy whatever your heart wants...if you have the money...I like to go to the city to see its beauty, and to parks. Yes this is ,... I like this the most. Where there are some animals, that is what I like. Maybe Australians are different than our people but I don't know any of them'*

Mara's responses displayed her strong integrative motivation, and curiosity to get to know the host country culture. Her responses point toward her Acceptance phase. This phase does not mean agreement – cultural differences may be seen as negative – but the judgment is not ethnocentric.

*I like in Australia. I will learn everything about this country. I am glad that I came. Sometimes I regret that I didn't come earlier,.... Ah... three or four years ago.*

#### **4. Collecting data about the students' attitudes towards learning English**

Melissa responded to the question whether she considers it important to acquire good English skills with clearly identifiable instrumental motivation:

*'I think it is important to learn good English, because without it I could not go to High School '.*

Haso explained that he needs English for communication:

*' It is important to learn English. When I go to the city or somewhere, I need English when I want to buy something, or somebody asks me something, or I have to ask about the price of something. So that I can ask.'*

Mara showed a strong level of motivation and no concerns that focusing on learning English would negatively affect her native language skills:

*'I think I need here English very much and I have to really learn it.'*

*'There is no way I would lose my mother tongue as I wouldn't ever speak in English to my parents.'*

#### **5. Comparison of the two cultures as experienced by the students**

When the three students were asked to compare their culture with what they perceive as being the Australian culture, Melissa showed a clear 'us and them' or 'in-group' versus 'out-group' philosophy. *I don't want to be like them ('the Australians'), I don't want to walk barefoot through the city.* (Melissa had a high level of fashion consciousness and she perceived walking around barefoot as a sign of bad taste or poverty). However she was quite critical towards her own people as well, as she described them as being *'impatient, gossiping, loud and not as fine as the Australians, but on the other hand very hospitable and warm'*. These data indicate that Melissa developed anomie – (Durkheim in Lambert 1967) a feeling that refers to feelings of social uncertainty or dissatisfaction combined with an anxious anticipation of entering a new group and a possible regret to lose the native culture.

Condon (1973) calls acculturation a reorientation in feeling and thinking. Mara experienced the strongest reorientation and displayed a strong aversion towards the people from her former home country. This was probably based on her war experiences. She showed a strong integrative motivation to become a fully unrecognizable member of the Australian society. If attitudes guide language learning success and acculturation as Oller, Hudson and Liu (1977) stated, then Mara was likely to develop a completely new self with positive attitudes toward the target language group and its language in a short period of time.

In sum, the students were aware of the differences between the two cultures. The collected data were shown to the ESL teachers at the School who appreciated that they learned about the students' culture through these comparisons. They also gained an insight in the students' attitudes and motivation and their experiences with both, their own culture and the target culture. However one question remained unclarified, that was: how to understand the confusing linguistic identification of the Bosnians?

The following explanations might help.

“Who usually claims to speak Bosnian?”

- The Muslims (Bosnjaks) in/from Bosnia and some Muslim citizens who live in the Serbian province of Sandzak.

“Who usually claims to speak Croatian?”

- Croats from different parts of Croatia, Bosnian Croats from Hercegovina and Croats from the Serbian Autonomous Province of Vojvodina.

To the question, “Who usually claims to speak Serbian?” the following answers are possible:

- Serbs from Serbia proper and Montenegro, Serbian refugees and migrants who came from Bosnia, Kosovo or Croatia and Serbs who live or came from the autonomous province called Vojvodina.

This shows that not all the people who live in or came from Bosnia call the language “Bosnian”, although independent of their ethnic backgrounds they speak the same language.

The Australian Government responded to this complex situation with an official recognition of all three languages as distinct languages. There are separate NAATI-registered translators for Serbian, Bosnian and Croatian and former Yugoslav citizens can automatically claim in their CV-s that they speak three different languages. However, differences among these languages are at this point in time similar to those among Australian English, Canadian English or British English. In other words, despite differences in pronunciation and vocabulary, speakers of these languages can communicate with each other perfectly well without translators. Since the mid-1800s there had been an ongoing debate as to whether these three languages are regional varieties of one language or three distinct languages. However, if we accept that language and culture are inseparable, it is justifiable to view these languages as separate languages as they have three different cultures and religions in their background.

This leads to the question, how valuable it is for teachers to know the culturally distinctive features of an ethnic group, when Scollon and Scollon (1995) showed that variations within a broad national culture can occur as a result of distinctive personal experiences. Considering the autonomy of a student as an individual in a society, how appropriate is it to attribute perceived broad national and cultural values and attitudes to a student? Can this happen without stereotyping and being culturally biased? As the data collected from the three students show, it does not seem to be appropriate at all. However being informed about the holistic cultural context is relevant because it provides a framework that shapes the subgroups and the individuals who live within this cultural context. It promotes intercultural understanding and sensitivity. As a matter of fact, the three Bosnian case studies demonstrate that the geographical spot at which the students were brought up gave them common behavioural features and similar world-views. These were taken prevalently from the holistic cultural framework and not from the ethnic subgroups.

### ***How well are teachers prepared to function in culturally- diverse classrooms?***

Given the complexity of the issues discussed above, the naturally emerging question is, how well are teachers prepared to function appropriately in their multicultural classrooms. The interview responses of the three ESL teachers of the Bosnian students show that they consider their teacher-training programs had not prepared them sufficiently to cope with the ethnic diversity of their classrooms. Their cultural learning was rather sporadic and eclectic. When asked how much they knew about Bosnia, its history, its ethnic make-up and how distinct the three major ethnic cultures are, they expressed their need for more information and tighter collaboration with the relevant ethnic communities and parents. They felt that the harmony day festivals and multicultural days were good strategies for promoting intercultural sensitivity, but not sufficient.

### **Conclusion**

One of the basic axioms of excellence in teaching outlined in the Principles of Effective Teaching and Learning document of Education Queensland (1994 ) is: Get to know your learners best. In attempting to do so, teachers collect a range of diverse data including information on cultural background and language spoken at home. Many of the Bosnian students come from ethnically-mixed



homes and cultures. The label 'Bosnian student' is generally understood as a cultural background indicator. However in reality this label has only a geographic labelling role, whereas many of the students have a blended culture and often refuse to commit themselves ethnically. In the three discussed cases, there was no overtly manifested bond in relation to an ethnic group. In such cases teachers should not insist on information related to cultural or ethnic identity. Students have all sorts of reasons for avoiding such labels.

In conclusion, this paper identified some relevant issues related to the acquisition of intercultural sensitivity. These are: get to know your learners as well as possible and inform yourself about your students' cultures, beliefs and values. Talking sensitively and in informed ways about the students' self-perception (how they see themselves) and finding out about their attitudes towards their new context and language are vital. This information not only reveals at which acculturation stage the students are, but shows their experiences with the new culture and their motivation to integrate and learn the language of their surrounding. Talking about cultural differences is pivotal.

An additional issue that emerged from the data was, a need for better communication and information. Not only the teachers should learn about their students' cultures but the students and their parents should be equally informed about the Australian culture, about the culture of the school, about the behavioural expectations of the school, about the rationale for teaching in certain ways, about the role of homework, about the reasons why students should become autonomous learners and how they will be helped to discover which learning strategies suit them best. This should involve the parents in the education of their children and assist them in developing a better understanding of cultural and educational differences. Finally, this project has implications for teacher training. There was a clearly identified need for a better teacher preparation in terms of intercultural literacy and pedagogy.

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