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CPL Podcast: Multicultural Education K-12

Host: Carly Boreland

With: Mark Harris, Chantel Mirzai and Cathy Clift

INTRODUCTION:

You're listening to the JPL podcast from the Centre for Professional Learning. Here's your host, Carly Boreland.

Carly Boreland:

Welcome to the JPL podcast for the New South Wales Teacher Federation's Centre for Professional Learning. I'm Carly Boreland and I'm the editor of the JPL. Today, I'm talking with Mark Harris, Cathy Clift and Chantel Mirzai, and we're talking about multicultural education and how they've made their school a really inclusive place to be. Mark, Chantel and Cathy, welcome.

We're going to talk about really big important things in public education today, especially multicultural education. We've got the three of you here from Auburn North Public School. So, you are all from one place but we think there are some values coming from your school that would be great to encourage other schools to really make the most of, regardless of what their student population is like. Chantel, I might start with you. Can you tell me about yourself and how you came to be at Auburn North, and what you love about your school and your community there?

Chantel Mirzai:

Absolutely! I am lucky enough to be a proud product of multicultural education and public education. I grew up in Fairfield West and was fortunate enough to attend a really multicultural primary and high school and, upon completing university, I did my final prac and internship at Auburn North Public School and just fell in love with the inclusive nature, and the community-feel, at our school. I've been fortunate enough to have worked at the school of seven years now and am currently in an instructional leadership role at Auburn North.

Carly Boreland:

How about you Cathy?

Cathy Clift:

I've been working at the school for approximately twenty years in lots of different roles. I trained as a teacher in New Zealand, worked there for a couple of years and then like most Kiwis, went on an overseas experience to London and worked there for three years. I then came to Australia where I met my husband, have had two beautiful boys, and have worked at the school in different roles. I love Auburn North, it's a wonderful community school; it's very diverse, it's very inclusive and it's just a wonderful, supportive community to be part of.



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Carly Boreland:

And Mark, I came to meet you because you're the *2019 Eric Pearson Study Grant* award recipient. Can you tell us a bit about that and then can you tell me about your experience?

Mark Harris:

Thank you. The *Eric Pearson Study Grant* is very important to me because it's going to assist me in one of my great passions, and that's refugee education. The purpose of the grant is to acknowledge that the NSW Department of Education, and specifically its multicultural education unit, has developed high quality programs, practices and strategies to assist students with multicultural backgrounds in NSW schools. However, the purpose of the study really is to look at other systems and the way in which they achieve outstanding outcomes for their multicultural students, and in particular refugee students. We're going to focus (in the study) on high performing countries such as Canada and Finland, and the way in which they're engaging teachers, leaders and students, together in communities of practice, to improve learning outcomes, social outcomes and emotional outcomes for refugee students. So the idea is to learn from these systems, bring them back to NSW, integrate them into the NSW [public education] system and hopefully develop a world's best set of policies, programs and practices related to refugee education which would benefit the students who attend our public schools.

I was very fortunate to join the Auburn North family way back in 2000. Until that time, I'd never worked in a multicultural school. I was the Principal of a school out in Sydney's Western suburbs, which was where I grew up and spent a lot of my career. The reason I applied was that I wanted to learn more about multicultural education and about different cultures. Over the last nineteen years I've learned so much about myself but I've [also] learned so much about people from other cultures and it's made me a better person just by being a member of the Auburn North family.

Carly Boreland:

Cathy and Mark, you've been involved with the school for twenty years; how has the community changed/developed over that time? What have you seen over that time (because you don't often meet teachers who have been in one place for such a long time)?

Cathy Clift:

The ethos of the school hasn't really changed at all. In the beginning years, I think the main demographic of the students that were there were from a Turkish/Arabic background – they were the dominant migrant group. But over the years that has changed to be more Afghani/Dari speaking students, and more recently, there are more Urdu/Indian migrants that are coming into the community.

Carly Boreland:

I'm sorry to put you on the spot but I'm sure one of you will know this. Do you know how many different languages are spoken at home for the students who are at your school?



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Mark Harris:

At Auburn North presently we have people from sixty different cultural backgrounds who speak more than forty five different languages, and that's been the case for the last nineteen years, as Cathy said. It's always been one of Australia's most multicultural schools.

What changed at Auburn North was in about 2005 we started to receive our first refugee students, who were the boat people from Afghanistan predominantly, and it changed our culture significantly – it softened our culture. We found that the refugee families who have come from Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran are very respectful people and very polite kind people, who have really softened our culture. At around about that same time, our *Schools as Community Centres* program started and our wonderful facilitator, Christine Daujotis, started leading that program. And because Christine is such a beautiful person, who adults love to be around, she was able to open up our school to our parents (many of whom are from a refugee background and many of whom have not attended a school). So over this period of time, it's always been a multicultural school, changed when large numbers of refugee families joined our school -[they] softened it. Then Christine joined our community, started to engage parents to a point where you will probably find that Auburn North has the highest number of parent involvement in the state, and we're very proud of that.

Carly Boreland:

I want to ask you a lot more about the way you interact with parents and I'll do that shortly. Can I ask all of you about the distinction between multiculturalism and a student population, and then refugee students as well – sometimes all of that gets lumped in together. Can you tell us what multiculturalism education is like at your school; what it means at your school?

Chantel Mirzai:

It's the day in, day out of everything that we do. So the cultural makeup of our students is this wonderful tapestry that we get to enjoy on a daily basis. Students learning together: learning from their teachers; learning with their teachers; learning from one another; and learning (what I know Mark shares, and what we all believe is life's most important lesson and that is) regardless of a student's cultural background/parent's cultural background, religion or skin colour, that we are all essentially all the same). That in essence, we all want to live outstanding, happy and productive lives. And in that essence, I think students, on a day to day basis, get to learn that lesson whilst learning and playing with their peers and interacting with the most beautiful teachers, and being raised by wonderful families who want nothing but the best for their students.

Carly Boreland:

Those are all things that I imagine should be common to *all* public schools and that is one of the main lessons that (certainly your school) hopefully all our schools are teaching.



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Cathy Clift:

I think also, to add to that, Chantel, is that underpinning everything that we do are our school's *values*. This is built into part of our commendation system and it's something that the students live and breathe every single day: that they're kind; that they're fair; that they're friendly, they're honest, responsible. And these are the *values* that you'll hear teachers using; students using; parents using on a daily basis. And it's something that really assists the boys and girls to be harmonious with each other.

Mark Harris:

I'm sure that all schools, regardless of their demographic, are focusing on assisting students to be successful now, in the future and for the rest of their lives. We know that our boys and girls will be going into a workforce which we probably can't imagine. But what we can imagine is they will be going into a workforce where there will be people from around the world working with them. So what better time to learn about mutually respectful relationships, respecting one another regardless of their backgrounds, than in their primary years? Whether they're surrounded by students of multicultural background or not? I know that all NSW public schools are implementing programs so that students can develop that appreciation at a young age, cemented during their high school years, and then they're very well rounded people ready to communicate, live with, learn with and learn from, people from around the world.

Carly Boreland:

And I suppose seeing that as something positive in their lives, not something as "I have to get along with people because it's what I'm supposed to do but because I'm personally enriched by that experience and opportunity as well."

Chantel Merzai:

It's why we try to avoid the word "*tolerance*". It's not that you "tolerate" one another, it's that you "appreciate" one another and that you "respect" one another, and it's the reason why "*respect*" is such a significant value that is highlighted, explicitly taught, and demonstrated through all the interactions and relationships that exists in our wonderful school learning community.

Carly Boreland:

Can I talk to you about the *how* part then of how we can make this happen? I'm really interested in this because sometimes you hear that public schools don't necessarily teach *values* in the same way that other schools type do, and I think that's simply not true. Can I ask, in your experience, how have you gone about making this inclusive school where "*inclusion*" is valued and *all of the people* are valued?

Cathy Clift:

If I go back to the commendation system with the *values*, it's a like set of rules (it's like the *Auburn North way*) that students know that the expectation is that you are kind, that you are fair, and that this is what is acknowledged on a daily basis. As well as the *values*, every year we'll have a saying that really help



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students to direct and focus what their attention is for that year, and for this year the saying is “We will work as one team to achieve our dreams”. I was on duty this morning and a little child in Year 1 came up to say “Oh, Mrs Clift, ‘We will work as one to achieve our dreams!’”. “Oh, fantastic! What’s your dream this year?” And students are able to articulate that like, “My dream is to go to the *Principal’s Morning tea*” or “To get my best ever Semester 1 report”, so because it’s acknowledged and valued, that’s what the students strive to achieve because it’s reinforced every single day.

Mark Harris:

And just to add onto that, our *values* (as Cathy has said) are *respect, friendship, fairness, kindness, honesty and responsibility*, and they are written on our commendations. Each day, we have a 10-12 minute community assembly (K-6) which is attended by more than 140 parents every single day.

Carly Boreland:

Do [the parents] stand around the outside?

Mark Harris:

They stand and listen to the announcements. We focus on one particular value each week and at the end of the week, students who have demonstrated that particular value, through the entire week, are rewarded in some way. So the parents are hearing what the *values* are; the students can recite what the values are; they are living the values; they are rewarded for living by, and learning by, those particular *values*. And what’s very special about the *Principal’s Morning Tea* is - they don’t look forward to having morning tea with me, they look forward to *Principal’s Morning Tea* with their parents, who come along, and with the teachers. It’s the same with our *Gold Badge Program* – it’s all about the parents. So, it’s a three-way street at Auburn North (and that’s one of the things that is very strong about our school) - it’s always student, teacher, parent. So they feel those *values*: they feel as if they’re being respected; they know that it’s a friendly school; they know it’s fair (we’re being fair and kind to one another). And it gives a very positive light of public education to our parents – because many of our parents have never attended school. So we are the first face of public education for our parents as they arrive in Australia. We take that very seriously and we’re very proud that we do represent the best possible face of NSW public education to our parents.

Carly Boreland:

And they must be your greatest advocates as well.

Chantel Mirzai:

I would just add that (as with anything I think but especially as we talk about *values* and especially for many of our teachers who have grown up living in Australia) what’s really important is that we actually explicitly *teach* those *values*: that yes we can see them in action on a daily basis. We’re developing the *character* of students, from 5 to 12 years old. And so what we do, in a very explicit and systematic way over the year, is that we imbed *our values* into lessons in the classrooms as well. Particularly in the first



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five weeks of the brand new school year, where children have had six weeks of having fun and playing over the Christmas break, and then, when they join their brand new class the following year, they have the opportunity, over those first few weeks, to engage in lessons that focus on a *value* per lesson – to be able to speak about, and define what each of those *values* actually mean, and then participate in activities, like role plays, where they’re actually practising those particular *values*. Because then all the teachers can then reference those values and they have meaning - they’re not just words. For example, “*responsibility*”, what does that mean to a five year old? How can you demonstrate that as a five year old in a Kindergarten classroom? And what does *friendship* really look like, particularly for a Year 5 and 6 students (as they’re considering the whole cyber world) what does it mean to be a good friend both in person and then also online? It’s about looking developmentally at each of the *values* right across the K-6 school and seeing their application. So I think “*explicit teaching*” is very important – yes, we show it through our day to day -but we also need to make time to actually talk about *our values* to our students.

Carly Boreland:

I like that and it goes to that whole thing about the importance of [not only] “*explicitness*” but also that public education is filled with “*values*” – they’re everywhere! I want to ask more questions about *how* you make it happen. Because, I imagine, there are people at schools thinking “oh yeah but my school’s so big and we couldn’t possibly be on assembly together and do this kind of thing!” How many students are at your school?

Mark Harris:

There are 705 students from Kindergarten to Year 6. Some people have questioned over the years “Isn’t that wasted learning time?” What we think is - during those ten minutes, at the beginning of each day, it’s developing this community (this community of the “*collective community efficacy*” if you like) whereby all our parents, all of our kids, [get to] know what our *values* are; emphasis about learning. We present Principal’s Awards for each grade, each day of the week, and parents get to hear why the children are receiving the awards (and the children are very proud to receive those).

Cathy Clift:

And there’s a real focus on learning at those awards. Yes, those *values* are there because we know the emotional wellbeing and the academic side of things are mutually dependent on one another. So as much as we are embracing those *values*, we are also talking about learning *and* specific skills that students have acquired. And those things are heard daily during those ten minute assemblies.

Carly Boreland:

And I suppose if someone is listening and is thinking “what messages can I take from this for my own school?” you’ve got over 700 students; you have over a couple of hundred of parents (standing around the outside); just under 100 teachers would probably be there as well. So you’ve got almost 1,000 people all together every single day. We’re not saying every school has to do that for ten minutes every day but that’s something that’s been effective at your school that they could try. Can you tell us more



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about the things about your school that make you unique and how you've tapped into what's working for your community?

Chantel Mirzai:

We have a really strong understanding of our context. And balance that by keeping abreast with research and evidence. What we try to do (particularly as a leadership team) is to engage strongly with what the evidence is telling us and consider the application of the evidence in our context – and that's kind of the *Auburn North way* that we like to describe. So, we've looked at the research, particularly over the past five years, and have found that what seems to be having the greatest impact on improving the outcomes for students is this notion of “*collective teacher efficacy*” – this idea that *all* teachers in a school learning community have this true feeling (this positive feeling) that *all* students can achieve, and that is known and felt by *all* members of the learning community. Considering our context, we've looked at that evidence, and have considered “Right. So if we know that this collective belief of teachers is so strong it has an effect size of 1.57, what would that look like if we aim to develop ‘*collective community efficacy*?’” So, this idea that *all* members of our school learning community (who we define as our beautiful students, our wonderful parents, our exceptionally hard working teachers, and our leaders) are working together with this unrelenting pursuit of excellence and this feeling that *every* single member of our school learning community can achieve outstanding outcomes socially, emotionally and academically. And what we've done is to develop a *vision*, a *mission* and a *school plan*, where every program and practice that exists is to develop “*collective community efficacy*”. Yes, we have a thousand people at that morning assembly, but everyone is striving in the same direction. It's very clear: our priorities, while detailed, are narrow. We're looking at developing the potential within *each* member of our community because if we do that, our students become the most fortunate and advantaged students.

Mark Harris:

We've just about perfected the *orderly learning environment* and it's a pre-requisite for any successful teaching and learning to take place. We have always wanted for teachers to be able to come and teach, and for students to come and learn. I am very proud to say that essentially, we don't have any behavioural problems. There are a number of factors for that because Cathy and Chantel, and their leadership colleagues, have looked at the research, and developed the *Auburn North instructional model* – specific and clear teaching; feedback etc. - an orderly learning environment. Our teachers are such beautiful people that kids love being in their classes, and those teachers are really reflecting what they feel get from their leaders.

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Carly Boreland:

I've got a question about the involvement of the parents that I think is really important. What it sounds like to me, is that you involve the parents because it's important that the whole community is together, and it sounds like it's not about saying "We need to make the parents like this so they can help the kids at home". Is that kind of on the right track?

Mark Harris:

There are a number of reasons why we make parent involvement a priority. Number one, all the research shows that the more a parent is involved in their child's education, the better the child does. The research shows that the more parent involvement in a school, the better the school performs. However, we've got a humanistic approach – we want to give our parents the opportunity to be involved in their children's learning and we want to look at different strategies to engage them and give them the opportunity to do it. So yes, of course it assists student's learning in the social and emotional outcomes, but we want to do it for our parents.

Chantel Mirzai:

It's strategic action through our school plan to engage families as "*partners*" in learning, and we wanted to do that in a real and authentic way. So we've run a number of "*grade based*" workshops for parents to assist them in understanding the way in which schools work in Australia (which can be different to education systems in countries that a lot of our families come from); then moves into a development of strategies, through really practical hands - on games, to assist them in developing their children's literacy and numeracy skills. A lot of our parents really want to know "So, in Year 1, what is it that you're learning in *Maths in the Classroom* and how do I help?" They really want to know that. And we ensure that each of those programs is translated; we have our wonderful *Community Languages teachers* and *Community Liaison Officers* who are able to assist with the translation of those workshops. We provide resources for the families to use at home. And recently, we've ensured that all of the games and activities are filmed by teachers and students in the school setting and then are hosted on our library links website. So that even families, who perhaps have mum or dad who at work, can engage with those activities at home as well. So we're really trying to ensure that that reach is really wide. We've had wonderful success with the program. On any given morning that we may workshop we've had close to 50-60 parents attend those sessions. And then, by being able to track and monitor online, we can see the volume of parents that are engaging with the materials online as well, which is just fantastic and means that parents have a heightened awareness of what's happening at school. They don't see school as perhaps as a bit of a threatening, less than welcoming, scary place (just because it's new and different). They are able to show their children "I value this thing, I value education, and I really think it's important that we sit down and do these activities together." And then in some instances, particularly with our K-2 sessions, some of our parents are actually developing their own literacy and numeracy skills. As a presenter of those sessions, I found that to be so gratifying because a parent can then open a piece of mail and understand the contents, and that's so empowering and special.



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Carly Boreland:

It sounds like, through doing that, you're sending out some really clear values - that you value the parents' first language, and you value what they bring - as much as what we can give to them, and through that, you're valuing the students' first language and the students' parents as well, so there's that "explicit" and "implicit" statement that "Everybody is important at this place."

Mark Harris:

And interestingly, a Director was in our school when one of the sessions was taking place and she has a couple of children who attend a NSW public school. She said "I wish my child's school would run these sessions for myself and for my partner." So I don't think it matters what sort of school you're in, *all* parents want to know exactly how they can assist their children and that's why this program has been so successful – one of the reason is it's specific to a particular skill; to a particular age group.

Carly Boreland:

So where you guys are at (for Mark nineteen years in, for Cathy twenty years in, seven years in for you Chantel) and looking back, with the benefit of hindsight, can you suggest for people (at all kinds of different schools) what are some of the resources that might be available? Where could they begin? And what you think is needed, or what you think sometimes gets in the way of some of this good work and how you have managed those things?

Cathy Clift:

I think what we said originally where we thought about people looking at their own context and seeing the resources you have within your own school first (particularly when it comes to multicultural education). Have a look: do a situational analysis or to do a survey. Do schools know their complete context and make-up? Have they looked at their scale reports? Those types of things we thought would be useful for leaders.

Carly Boreland:

Do you have particular Department policies that you start with?

Mark Harris:

The Department has developed a set of policies and programs. We're all very familiar with those policies and programs. We've moved further forward than those, I believe, at Auburn North, because we've been around multiculturalism education for so long. What we are doing is integrating all of our approaches - in terms of our "three Ps" – *our people, our programs and our practices*. So, they can be transposed successfully into any school context. Yes, it is about multicultural education but the way, in which we utilize *our people, our programs and practices*, would be successful in any setting (but they would have to be contextualised, obviously).



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Carly Boreland:

So you mean taking advantage of the people you have at your school and valuing them?

Mark Harris:

Their total commitment to the wellbeing and education of students, and the inclusiveness of parents and the wider community, that's the "essence" of what any school needs – that total commitment; that cohesiveness that you get when everyone is headed in the one direction.

Chantel Mirzai:

We've set out this clear pathway that we're headed (for at least the next three years) based on evidence, based on our data. Because, in education, there is always another thing that's coming in, and the leadership program, that we're currently participating in, has taught us "Something has to go". So, to consistently keep on course with your priorities (as a leadership team; as a teaching team) you need to determine "Is this going to value-add for our beautiful students? If not, how can we minimize the impact of this particular program, or, place it at a better time, so that *it* can have impact as well?"

Carly Boreland:

And the Department has some guidelines about how many hours a day you should spend on [for example] the *English block*, and things like that. And sometimes teachers laugh at the idea that you would have 2 hours every day devoted to things like that because the life of a school just gets in the way. But it sounds like you guys are saying "No, there are some things we are going to go to the wall on, and that is, face to face teaching time and what we do in that time really matters."

Cathy Clift:

And a lot of the targeted intervention for students will happen through the allocation of our human resources. So we make sure that, by using our data, the human resources are placed where the needs are as well.

Carly Boreland:

It sounds like you've picked out the things that are going to count to you and what you're going to look through. It's not student "*learning data*" or *the data*, it's "*our data*" (and you've both said that at different times) because it's clear that you've made some decisions, at school, about "which things we are going to spend time looking at and what things we are going to focus on".

Chantel Mirzai:

You've picked up on that perfectly. We have a set of literacy and numeracy targets. So it's the way in which we try to triangulate our data. Yes, we have NAPLAN (our external measure), but we've developed a *K-6 Assessment and Evaluation schedule*, and any leader across the school (any teacher in fact) can tell you, whether they're teaching a Year 1 class or another grade, what the Year 6 targets are. We have strong transparency in that regard and we have a rigorous schedule around collecting our own



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data because “that’s” information and every data set is a story. Through that, we, carefully and strategically, make decisions, as a leader and teaching team, for the benefit of the students. We are very clear about what areas (the curriculum is so massive and so big) are particularly critical for students to develop now and into the future and we prioritise those. They are then imbedded in our *Parents as Partners Program* so parents are learning what are the prioritised literacy and numeracy skills across the school. And that then assists, in every key learning area, because when students have the fundamental basics skills, in combination with prioritised, explicitly taught, 21st century and technology skills, we are assisting developing students who will be successful now and into to the future.

Carly Boreland:

Mark, Chantel and Cathy, thanks for sharing the story of your school with us, and through that, the great *values* of our public education system. I know that teachers all over NSW, no matter how remote, will find something in your story that they can take back to their school and celebrate with the people that are in their communities as well. Thank you.

Mark Harris, Chantel Mirzai & Cathy Clift:

Thank you. Thanks so much.

Carly Boreland:

You've been listening to the JPL podcast for the Teachers Federation's Centre for Professional Learning. I'm Carly Boreland, and I'm the Editor of the JPL. I've been talking with Mark Harris, Cathy Clift and Chantel Mirzai about multicultural education and inclusive education experiences. And to find out more, and to listen to further podcasts, you can go to our website at cpl.asn.au/podcasts

CONCLUSION:

The JPL Podcast is produced by the Centre for Professional Learning and the New South Wales Teachers' Federation. All opinions expressed in this podcast are those of the individual speakers only, and do not necessarily represent the views of their employer or associated organisations. The host was Carly Boreland; technical direction by Jason Nicholas.

Mark Harris has taught in high schools and primary schools in five different countries. Over the past 22 years, Mark has been the principal of three NSW public primary schools and is presently the very proud principal of Auburn North Public School, which is one of Australia's most multicultural schools. Mark is committed to leading school communities that develop community cohesion and social harmony and unity, that assist students achieve outstanding learning, social and emotional outcomes, and that facilitate the engagement and participation of all parents, especially parents of refugee students who may otherwise be at risk of being marginalised from our society and from their children's education.

Cathy Clift has worked as a teacher in New Zealand, England and Australia. Cathy has been a Teacher Librarian and Assistant Principal at Auburn North Public School and is presently its Deputy Principal.



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Cathy is a committed and innovative member of the Auburn North Public School Learning Community, whose mission is to provide its students with an extraordinary education, inspired by expert teachers and leaders in partnership with supportive families. Cathy is passionate about building collaborative learning communities and works strategically with the school leadership team to maximise the academic, social and emotional outcomes for students, staff and parents.

Chantel Mirzai is a Deputy Principal Instructional Leader at Auburn North Public School. She began teaching in this dynamic and diverse learning community as an intern in 2011. Chantel is passionate about building the capacity of Early Career Teachers to maximise Literacy and Numeracy learning outcomes for all students. She collaboratively develops evidence-based Teacher Professional Learning workshops for the wider staff and regularly engages in one-to-one coaching with individual teachers to assist them develop the knowledge, skills and abilities to create inclusive, engaging and high-performing learning environments.