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**Diversity in Intensive English Language Centres in South Australia:
Sociocultural approaches to education for students with migrant or
refugee backgrounds**

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**Diversity in Intensive English Language Centres in South Australia:
Sociocultural approaches to education for students with migrant or
refugee backgrounds**

While there is a body of research concerning the education of students with migrant or refugee backgrounds, little of this research focuses on primary-school aged children. In order to address this gap, the current paper utilises data gained from an ethnographic study to consider the challenges and opportunities associated with diverse classrooms designed for students learning English, in which students come from a complex range of backgrounds and may have experienced trauma. The paper provides support for sociocultural learning approaches, whereby students' own cultural and linguistic background are treated as beneficial to education rather than as obstacles to be overcome.

Keywords: refugees, migrants, diversity (student), education, English (additional language), sociocultural theory

It has increasingly become the case that classrooms in countries such as Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom are characterised by diversity, leading to the importance of gaining knowledge about learning approaches that represent best-practice when working with diverse students bodies (Leung 2005). Such knowledge is particularly valuable in classrooms designed for students with migrant or refugee backgrounds learning the language of their resettlement community (Taylor and Sidhu 2012). In these classrooms, diversity is evident in relation to cultural, linguistic and ethnic background, as well as in relation to migration histories, previous experiences of education, and potential exposure to traumatic events. As such, evidence concerning effective approaches to teaching in such environments is crucial to ensuring positive outcomes for students.

Previous research has highlighted the importance of recognising diversity in classrooms and the need for whole-school approaches that take into account both learning, and social and emotional needs (see, for example, Block et al., 2014). In order to build on this research, the current paper draws upon data gained from the ethnographic component of a study designed to examine the experiences of students within such classrooms in Australia. The paper aims to explore the potential utility of sociocultural learning approaches, and thus the overarching research question concerns to what extent such approaches (e.g, Vygotsky 1978, 1986) are present, and whether they enable teachers to respond to the challenges and opportunities provided by diverse classrooms.

Sociocultural learning models and education of children from diverse backgrounds

de Abreu and Elbers (2005), drawing upon Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the development of knowledge through the sharing of culture and language, argue that a chief concern for the education of students from diverse backgrounds is shared communication. Correspondingly, and as argued by Olson (2002), the meeting of school and home environments can play an important role in achievement at school, such that students learn better if they are able to draw upon and share their existing knowledge - or 'spontaneous concepts' - in their learning (see also Vygotsky 1986). As such, sociocultural learning approaches focus on the interaction between spontaneous concepts (or the experiential knowledge of the children) and scientific concepts (or abstract thought and cognition) (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). It follows, then, that children learn better when the role of their own experiences and knowledge is recognised as an essential part of the learning process.

Furthermore, sociocultural learning theories have a particular focus on the ability of students to utilise information gained from more knowledgeable peers or teachers, and apply this to their existing concepts in order to increase the complexity of their knowledge (Vygotsky 1986). As argued by Luke, Woods and Dooley (2011), education following sociocultural models therefore aims to create what McNaughton (2002) terms a 'meeting of minds'; specifically, the ability to share knowledge between learners. Through this 'meeting of minds', learning can take place both 'top down' from teachers to students, but also build on learners' own terms and in relationship to their own experience (Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti 2005; Clay 1998). Correspondingly, mental processes and learning are seen as being tied to cultural and historical contexts (Wertsch 1991).

Despite the existence of a large body of theoretical and applied literature concerning sociocultural models of learning, there is less research considering this model specifically in the case of refugee and migrant students in resettlement countries such as Australia. What research there is suggests that sociocultural learning theories have particularly important implications for migrant and refugee students, for whom differences between home and school environments can be pronounced in resettlement countries, leading to an increased importance in relation to opportunities for sharing knowledge in a culturally meaningful way (Keddie 2011). In addition, research indicates that learning models which build upon the students' own cultural capital, experience, and 'spontaneous concepts' offer the best results for learning, further supporting the need for culturally relevant materials and discussions (Gregory 2004).

Further supporting the utility of a sociocultural learning approach is the fact that whole-school approaches to education that value all student contributions are central to positive educational experiences for young refugee and migrant students (e.g., Pugh, Every, and Hattam 2012; Block, et al. 2014; Keddie 2011). Furthermore, previous research has indicated that teacher attitudes towards students (particularly those with refugee backgrounds) is central to ensuring that students are able to showcase their knowledge, and that any challenges they face are not considered solely as behavioural difficulties (Keddie 2011; Due, Riggs and Mandara 2015). Correspondingly, it is important to consider the broader social context of schools in addition to the learning experiences of students with migrant or refugee backgrounds.

In relation specifically to language education, research indicates that learning an additional language can be enhanced by students also gaining greater knowledge in their first language(s), such as through attending language classes or continuing to communicate with their family in their first language(s) (Reese, et al. 2001). As such, Coleman (2010) argues that schools ought to see students as skilled learners possessing a useful resource (their first language) to bring to their current learning, rather than viewing their first language(s) as simply a hurdle to be overcome. Indeed, sociocultural learning models which view students as possessing valuable resources have been found to be the most effective in relation to language education (Callahan 2006), again providing further support to sociocultural approaches to education and learning.

Given this background, our aim in this paper was firstly to explore the challenges and opportunities provided by diverse classrooms for students with migrant or refugee backgrounds, in relation to creating positive social and learning environments. Secondly, we aimed to examine to what extent sociocultural learning approaches are employed within English-language classrooms, and whether they enable to teachers to respond to the challenges and opportunities presented. Specifically, the paper considers how students and teachers might create a common ground upon which to communicate and learn together, in accordance with the principles of sociocultural learning models within developmental psychology (e.g, Vygotsky 1978, 1986).

The Intensive English Language Program in South Australia, Australia

Children who are newly arrived to Australia are an extremely diverse group, with different cultural, linguistic and ethnic backgrounds, levels of English proficiency, and experiences of prior education (DIAC 2012a, 2012b). Education for students for whom English is an additional language in Australia is varied. In South Australia, the Department of Education and Child Development (DECD) run an Intensive English Language Program (IELP), consisting of Intensive English Language Classes (IELCs) within state-run primary schools. The primary emphasis in these centres is on the acquisition of English for social interaction, cultural training, and academic English literacy skills, provided by specialist teachers (DECD 2012). Time spent in the IELC before transition into a mainstream class varies, depending on a child's readiness in relation to their English language competency. Typically, children spend 12 months in the program if they are from a migrant background, and students from refugee backgrounds are eligible for an automatic extension on this time if required.

Given the nature of the program, in any given IELC there could be students from over 20 different countries, potentially speaking 20 languages or dialects. In the three schools in this present project, classes would typically have around 15 children, from up to 12 different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, meaning that for many children, there was no other person in the class who spoke the same language. In addition, classes were made of students with diverse pre-migration experiences, including refugee backgrounds.

Method

Procedure

The ethnography involved the researcher spending one day per week for approximately two terms in each school, dividing that time between each IELC classroom (comprising a total of around 20 hours in each classroom, and 100 hours in each school). During this time, the researcher observed classroom practices and student interactions during teaching times, and interacted with students during ‘social’ times such as meal times or free play. Ethnographic field notes were briefly documented during class times, and written in full immediately after leaving a class. The researcher avoided writing in front of children wherever possible in order to adopt a ‘least adult role’ (Mayall 2000).

The research was conducted across three IELC sites, all located within 15 kilometers of the city center. Their names are reserved for anonymity purposes (as are the names of the participants in the study), and are simply denoted here as ‘School 1’, ‘School 2’ and ‘School 3’. Both School 1 and School 2 comprised mainly students with migrant backgrounds, with a smaller body of students with refugee backgrounds, whilst School 3 had a larger number of refugee students.

Ethics approval for the project was obtained from the University of Adelaide Human Research Ethics Committee and from DECD prior to commencement of the project. Information sheets about the project were sent home to all parents of IELC children within the schools at the beginning of the project, both in English and in their first language. Given the observational nature of this component of the study, few

ethical issues presented, however we do acknowledge the complexity of ethics in relation to research with children with refugee or migrant backgrounds, most notably in relation to obtaining assent from children. In this regard, and following the work of previous ethnographic researchers working with children (see Christensen 2004; Van Ausdale and Feagin 2001), the researcher attempted to address issues of power and responsibility in the research, particularly in relation to ensuring the building of trust and rapport.

As a matter of terminology, we also wish to acknowledge in this paper that we are examining two potentially very different groups of children in considering education for children with migrant backgrounds, and children with refugee backgrounds (and see Ogbu 1978 for a discussion of the important differences between minority or marginalized groups in relation to culture and education). However, given that the context in which they are educated provides English language tuition for both groups of children (that is, they are in the same class rather than different ones), our paper, for the most part, does not differentiate between these two groups.

Analytic approach

In relation to ethnographic data analysis Scott Jones and Watt (2010) argue that there are two main stages; 1) ordering data in a way that makes analysis possible, and 2) actual data analysis. In this section, we outline our process in a way that ensures self-reflexivity and meets Tracy's (2010) eight criteria for rigour in qualitative research. In relation to the first point, the field notes were initially read in relation to the

challenges and opportunities afforded by diverse classrooms in the IELP, in line with the research aim of learning more about these diverse classrooms and the associated provision of education for student with migrant or refugee backgrounds. Once the data were categorised in this way, the notes were coded for the challenges and opportunities associated with diverse classrooms, and attention was paid to any suggestions in the data for the ways in which a sociocultural learning approach might enable teachers to respond to those. Whilst ethnography is at heart an inductive approach in that it attempts to find out about the world with minimal preconceptions (Siraj-Blatchford 2010), we acknowledge that having an over-arching research question provides a deductive research question to form the basis of the analysis. As such, the more traditional inductive approach to analysis was implemented after the initial coding into ‘opportunities’ or ‘challenges’ (and see Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006 for another example of this method). The inductive stage of the thematic analysis then involved the researcher identifying interesting features from the field notes, using repeated reading of the data and colour coding excerpts to indicate which category they would fall under, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). Finally, representative extracts were chosen, with enough detail and context to ensure that these extracts provide a picture of the overall cultural context in which the field notes were taken, given an primary aim of ethnography being to describe a given situation or scenario (Siraj-Blatchford 2010).

Results

In this section we explore the challenges and opportunities for creating positive learning and social environments associated with the diverse classrooms contained

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within the IELCs that participated in this project, paying particular attention to the learning approaches and interactions between students and staff in the classroom.

Diversity in classrooms: Opportunities

Two main opportunities were seen in the ethnographic data as stemming from the diverse classrooms in the IELCs: specifically, *diverse classrooms can create spaces for children to share their knowledge and experience*, and *diverse classrooms can foster positive interactions between students*.

Diverse classrooms can create spaces for children to share their knowledge and experience

The field notes indicated that classroom spaces in the IELCs led to multiple opportunities for teachers to ‘celebrate’ diversity in their student bodies, and this was most noticeable in relation to ethnic and cultural diversity in the students in the class. This ‘celebration’ of diversity appeared to go beyond a superficial discussion of ethnic or cultural differences (see Hage 1998), and instead was integrated into the everyday learning environment of the classroom, reflecting sociocultural learning models. For example, activities such as involving extended family members in daily classroom practices, learning about food and participating in food preparation, celebrating festivals important to the students in the classroom throughout the year, and learning about the different languages, cultures and countries of origin of the children in the classroom all appeared to be routine practice in the classes in which the observations took place. In particular, students appeared to enjoy “news” or “sharing” parts of the day where they had an opportunity to share information about their culture and background.

In relation to the opportunities provided by classroom diversity, it is of note that activities involving “sharing” about cultural background or country of origin were typically used to promote language learning through sharing English language in the context of the background of the student. This practice has been established by previous research as particularly important for children with migrant or refugee backgrounds in order to ensure some continuity between home and school (Saracho 2002). An example of this participation is provided in the following extract, taken from the field notes:

The classes are all involved in some food preparation today and really enjoying it. One of the student’s (from Sri Lanka) father has come in to do a presentation on Sri Lankan culture and the country itself. The children love learning about this, and seeing pictures of the student at the various festivals and so on. The teachers are all interested in hearing about it too and take lots of photos of the presentations and food preparation, as well as asking for a copy of the presentation for them to keep. Even the IELC co-ordinator comes in to listen for a while and it’s a great environment to be part of. Later, the students and her father prepare food for everyone to eat, and they talk with the teacher about the English names for the food preparation process.

This example demonstrates the ways in which the students had the opportunity to bring their own culture, background and experiential knowledge into the classes, as well as using their stories and knowledge as springboards for learning English.

Following work by Heath (1983), this example also demonstrates the ability for teachers to use these opportunities to both involve students’ backgrounds and

knowledges in an integral way in the classroom, whilst also integrating this knowledge into standard classroom practices (in this case, teaching about ‘procedure’ writing in the following of a recipe).

In relation to this involvement of students’ knowledge in their English language learning, it is worth noting that food appeared to be an integral part of the classrooms involved, and the students themselves displayed a particular interest in sharing food with each other (with the first author, who also conducted the observations). For example:

It is nearly lunch time. I chat to the students as they eat their lunch before going out to play. They are excited to tell me about the food that they have and often ask if I know the name for it “in my language” (meaning in their own language) or if I have had it before. They often ask me if I want to try it as well and seem really eager to share it with me.

As such, sharing and talking about food provided an opportunity for students to share information about their culture and background with their class in a way which all members of the class room could relate to. Teachers frequently encouraged this type of sharing, and sometimes participated in discussions around food or the contents of students’ lunch boxes, or spoke about the food from their own cultural background.

Such interactions and ability for a ‘meeting of minds’ (McNaughton 2002) went beyond food, however, and students and teachers frequently found ways to incorporate students’ knowledge and culture into classroom activities in a variety of

ways. Indeed, the environment of the classes within the IELCs at the three schools typically fostered and encouraged sharing about students' backgrounds, and this was exhibited in the field notes through frequent examples of conversations held with groups of students about countries they had lived in previously; conversations that often revolved around the class activities the students were undertaking at the time. This is exemplified in the following extract, which was recorded during and soon after a lesson about Australian native animals and the writing of 'descriptive' language:

The students love telling me about what animals they saw in the countries they came from. For example, when reading a story about Australian animals I asked "have you ever seen an X" before and they would all say "no, but I did see one in Y". They often told me stories about it as well, such as "in Korea I saw hens because my uncle used to have them and I wanted to get the eggs".

Again, this extract points to the ability for students in the IELCs to be involved in their learning actively and through social interactions with other students from different cultures, and such conversations around the learning material were typically encouraged by class teachers. In the example above, a learning context revolving around Australian animals was used to teach students conversational English, and the students were active in their ability to take this topic and use it as an opportunity to bring their own cultural background and previous experiences into the classroom environment.

Diverse classrooms can foster positive interactions between students

Another opportunity afforded by diversity in classrooms in the IELC was the fact that diversity was generally seen as something which everybody “had”, and as such power relationships within classes appeared to be minimized (and see the Discussion for further comment relating to power and diversity). Following this, the students in the IELCs appeared inclusive and interested in other students and their backgrounds, although it should be noted that occasionally there were tensions that teachers attributed to ethnic or cultural differences, such as arguments between students from countries with ongoing political or physical conflicts. However, students frequently acted in inclusive ways, such as in the following extract:

There is a new boy called Manu in the class from Bosnia. The students are very inclusive of him and he is even invited to another student’s birthday which is this weekend at the zoo. The students are very excited about this and chat about it quite a lot, including making sure that Manu knows where it is, etc. They are keen to teach him about the ways to pronounce the different animals they will see and at shared fruit time the teacher joins in the discussion, also.

This example demonstrates the inclusivity of the classroom as well as the ways in which students who had been in the class longer took the knowledge they had gained and used it to assist a new student. At times, students were also helpful in overcoming some of the challenges of the diverse classrooms in the IELP, a point examined in the following section.

Diversity in Classrooms: Challenges

Two themes were reflected in the data in relation to challenges which stemmed from the diversity in the IELCs: specifically, *diverse classrooms lead to multiple demands within single classrooms*, and *diverse classrooms can exacerbate student distress when starting school in Australia*.

Diverse classrooms lead to multiple demands within single classrooms

At times it was clear from the ethnographic observations that the large amount of diversity within the classrooms in the IELC could lead to tension in both students and teachers. For example, teachers within the IELCs were required to work across multiple ability levels with students who may have arrived with little to no knowledge of the English language or who had no prior schooling, and may also be suffering from trauma. One specific example of the challenges associated with diverse classrooms relates to working with children who may have developmental disabilities. An example of this is seen in the following extract:

In Mrs William's class, the students are colouring in pictures of undies to learn about the letter 'u'. They find this really fun, and are having a great time colouring in their undies and deciding what to put on them. They seem really engaged in the process of doing their work, however the class still seems somewhat stressful. For example, there are a couple of children with learning difficulties (ADHD or Autism Spectrum Disorder, for example) and Mrs William tells me that this is difficult to negotiate in the class where there is already so much diversity in terms of teaching and learning requirements (i.e.,

different levels of English, different admittance times, different cultural practices, individual differences in how stress is presented, and so on).

Here, the class teacher indicates that the presence of students with learning difficulties presented extra challenges for teachers who may already be struggling with teaching students with complex needs. In fact, learning difficulties were a topic frequently discussed by some of the teachers in the study, with the below extract providing an example of a teacher directly talking to the first author about this:

She tells me that some people have questioned whether Arthur has a learning difficulty as he has been quite slow to pick up English but that in Greek (and she speaks Greek also so can chat to him) he is very fluent and will talk to her so she thinks he is just plodding along at his own pace and doesn't need any assessment. However she says that Xei (who still doesn't speak either) is different and wont even talk in Mandarin [the language recorded as being spoken by his parents] to the Chinese Bilingual Social Service Officer and they are thinking about recommending an assessment for him. She says it is always hard to determine when assessments are needed if you can't talk the child's language at all.

This extract indicates the challenge of working with students with whom teachers could not converse, with the teacher in question indicating that Arthur would have potentially been referred for assessment of learning difficulties if it weren't for the fact that she could speak his language. Indeed, teachers frequently identified that identification, diagnosis and response to migrant and refugee student learning

difficulties were best dealt with within an IELP context. There was suggestion that learning difficulties would be misconceived in mainstream classes as undeveloped EALD skills, resulting in a late diagnosis, or - as in the extract above - an incorrect assumption that a student may have learning difficulties when in fact they do not.

Diverse classrooms can exacerbate student distress when starting school in Australia

Beginning at an IELC sometimes caused a lot of distress for students, as evident in the following extract:

At sport Amari is extremely upset and the teacher asks if I'll take her for a walk so that he can give the other students instructions to play a game as she is crying very loudly. I take her outside and we chat for a bit and she calms down. She tells me she wants to go to her school in Pakistan and she liked learning there. Later the teacher says that it is very hard for children at first especially when they don't speak much English.

While starting at a new school can cause distress for many students (see for example Ahtola et al. 2011), we would argue that students entering the IELP face additional challenges. For example, in this particular extract, Amari's distress may be related to cultural differences between her new school and her educational experiences in Pakistan, including the fact that, as a girl, she may not have participated in sporting activities previously (and see Dagkas, Benn, and Jawad 2011 for a discussion of this issue in Western schools). Correspondingly, beginning school in Australia brings a range of challenges for students from diverse backgrounds, beyond typical issues

involved in transition into formal education. This is further exemplified in the extract below:

The students are making little penguins out of some paper with a relief teacher. They seem to be really enjoying it and are happy to do it. There is a new boy in the class who doesn't speak any English but keeps asking what the time is and if he can go home yet. The relief teacher tells me not to say "no" to him as that seems to make him cry, and that its best just to say "yes, at 3:15 you'll see Mummy and Daddy". He asks the questions a lot, sometimes in some broken English but often in his own language.

As seen in this extract, language difficulties clearly exacerbated the distress experienced by the student during their transition into the IELC. This challenge may be specific to diverse classrooms, whereby there are so many different languages spoken that funding constrains providing support for all students. The ways in which sociocultural learning approaches may assist with these challenges is discussed next.

Discussion

As illustrated above, the diverse classrooms in the IELCs provided students with opportunities to create spaces in which to share their knowledge, and fostered positive interactions between students in the class. In both these instances, diversity in classrooms may be seen as a facilitating factor, with sociocultural learning approaches further assisting in providing these opportunities. For example, in relation to the creation of spaces in which to share knowledge, the diversity in classrooms led to a

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range of arguably sociocultural learning practices - including inviting students and their families to discuss their country of origin, cultural or religion - thereby providing an opportunity to interact in English, while also bringing previous knowledge and experience to the class (Vygotsky 1986). In this sense, encouraging interaction in lessons such as discussing animals or food can be seen as a “meeting of minds” (McNaughton 2002), with space made in class-time for learning tied to the cultural and historical backgrounds of the students (Wertsch 1991). Such approaches to learning have previously been linked with good learning outcomes (Gregory 2004), and thus our research highlights the fact that diverse classrooms may enable the creation of positive learning spaces through the recognition of children from diverse cultural backgrounds as active and knowledgeable learners.

Challenges present in the data included multiple demands on teachers, such as working with or identifying children with developmental disorders, and the additional challenges posed by diversity in languages spoken when starting at an IELC. Given the importance of student-teacher relationships (Due, Riggs, and Mandara 2015), it is important to note that while teachers typically displayed large amounts of dedication to their work and were trained specifically as English language teachers, it is nevertheless the case that the data suggested that teachers frequently found teaching in such complex environments challenging. This finding echoes previous research concerning some of the challenges of teaching students with migrant or refugee backgrounds and the need for ongoing institutional training and support (Due, Riggs, and Mandara 2015; Johnson 2003). In relation to developmental disorders, our findings support those of Booth (2007) who argued that diagnosis of learning difficulties in English languages students begins with teachers’ ability to query

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potential learning difficulties within multiple masking factors, and further emphasises the importance of developed intercultural teacher/student relationships.

A further challenge present in the data related to difficulties transitioning into the IELC, particularly due to language factors - as seen in the extract concerning the students who displayed distress when being answered with “no”. It is worth noting that sociocultural learning approaches highlight that learning an additional language (in this case, English), can be enhanced by students’ knowledge of their first language(s) (Reese, et al. 2001). In this sense, providing students with the opportunity to continue to engage with their linguistic background through a sociocultural approach to learning may go some way towards addressing this challenging aspect of diverse classes. Indeed, this approach to learning was seen in classrooms, particularly in relation to encouraging “sharing”, as discussed above.

Previous research concerning the education of students with migrant or refugee backgrounds promotes whole-school approaches to learning (Pugh, Every, and Hattam 2012; Block, et al. 2014), in which the entire school community becomes active in offering sociocultural learning opportunities for students, and in which the background and languages of all students are foregrounded and celebrated. Our observations did not extend to the mainstream classes at the schools in question, and as such we can not speak to whether the challenges and opportunities for positive social and learning environments seen within the IELCs in the study were also present within mainstream classes. We do, however, recognize that diversity is present in many – if not all – classrooms in countries such as Australia, and as such, future

research concerning sociocultural learning approaches in mainstream classes would be of use.

In relation to sociocultural learning approaches in schools more broadly, it is also important to note that schools within Australia (and elsewhere in the world) are typically required to operate in a culture that promotes standardized testing (such as the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests which are routinely administered to students in primary schools in Australia) and adhere to other statutory requirements, and this has implications for the support afforded to students with migrant or refugee backgrounds (Coleman 2010). In particular, research has found that teachers often report feeling underprepared to work with students with complex backgrounds in mainstream classes where they are more restricted in terms of their teaching requirements (Woods 2009). In such an environment, then, the role for an IELP which affords the opportunities discussed in this paper seems particularly important.

It is also important to note that the shared creation of knowledge afforded by sociocultural learning approaches may be particularly important for students with refugee backgrounds. There are several issues that may offer particular challenges for students with refugee backgrounds, including limited literacy and schooling in their first language and possible experiences of trauma (Foundation House 2007), as well as cultural misunderstandings within the schools themselves (Keddie 2011). For these students, then, the ‘soft’ landing of an IELP may offer a more nuanced approach to beginning school where at least some of the pressures of standardized testing are removed, and where sociocultural learning approaches can facilitate learning (Block,

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et al. 2014). However, it is also important to acknowledge that some of the approaches outlined in this paper may not be suitable for students with refugee backgrounds, who may have previous experiences of trauma which may mean they cannot engage in some of the “sharing” activities outlined in this paper, or who may not be able to bring parents or caregivers to the school to participate in such activities (Keddie 2011). Correspondingly, while this paper goes some way to contributing to the literature concerning positive learning and social environments for students with refugee or migrant backgrounds, further research concerning the ways to specifically support refugee students is warranted.

In conclusion, we would like to briefly discuss the issue of studying culture within environments such as school classrooms. There is a body of literature within disciplines such as cultural studies which notes that much education for students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds can become rooted within power relationships where global approaches to education are not adopted (Sidhu and Christie 2002). For example, food can become a marker of difference rather than a way to share culture (for example, see Hage 1998). We do not wish to dismiss these issues and concerns here. However, this ethnographic study within diverse classrooms highlights the importance of examining culture and interactions in context. Thus, whilst we acknowledge the very pressing need to problematise and critique the education of diverse populations of students (and see Matthews 2008), our research demonstrates the opportunities that adopting sociocultural approaches to education can have to ensure that discussions of culture transcend tokenistic displays of ‘difference’ to instead ensure that *all* children’s backgrounds and previous experiences are able to be drawn upon as strengths for their continuing education and development.

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