# Teachers and Teacher World-views

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*This paper discusses the increasing imperative for teachers who work in cultural settings other than their own to develop an understanding of their own world-view and the impact their assumptions about teachers, school, students, family and so on have on their teaching practice. The brief narrative of one cultural world-view provides an example of the areas where tensions may arise for teaching practice for the unprepared teacher working in a setting outside their own cultural experience.*

world-view, teachers, international, students, reflective practioners

## INTRODUCTION

Educators working in the new century of globalisation are finding an increasing imperative for cultural sensitivity and understanding. Boundaries between countries have become increasingly fluid and as Tier says, "The world is … more interconnected than ever before" (2003, p.77). Students move between countries for their formal education in primary as well as secondary and tertiary spheres. Within the Australian education sectors attracting students from overseas has been recognised as a legitimate activity for schools, colleges, training institutions and universities.

Another feature within the Australian education sector that has been developing over recent years has been the active recruitment of teachers to work overseas in a range of different educational settings. Global competition for teachers has become intense. Recent graduates as well as current practitioners are encouraged by marketing firms to look at an overseas experience of teaching as a means of broadening their life as well as professional experience.

The fluidity of education across cultural boundaries provides the context for an exploration of the necessity for teachers to understand their own world-view and its impact on their practice. A definition of world-view offered by Wright provides a scaffold for the paper's discussion:

> World-views…are like the foundations of a house: vital but invisible. They are that **through** which, not **at** which a society or individual normally looks; they form the grid according to which humans organize reality, not bits of reality that offer themselves for organization. They are not usually called to consciousness or discussion unless they are challenged or flouted fairly explicitly, and when this happens it is usually felt to be an event of worryingly large significance. (Wright, 1992, p.125)

World-view is something that is embedded in the person, it provides the window through which people view the world in which they are living and with which they interact. Teachers crossing into cultures different to their own can be largely unaware that they take with them an embedded and largely unchallenged view of 'how things are'. Such views have shaped their educational practice, and have provided a basis on which they have based assumptions about, among other things, learners, learning, teachers, schooling and teaching. Teachers who have lived and worked within the Australian educational context are products of a dominant culture, for example, that values individualism above collectivism.

A clear contrast between the world-view of Western-based teachers and that of students from a culture with a traditional Palestinian Arabic world-view will provide just one illustration of the

need for teachers to exercise extreme caution when crossing cultural boundaries. Of necessity the first sections of this paper are descriptive and in narrative format. Wright (1992) has written that most world-views provide the stories through which human beings can view reality and that narrative was the most characteristic expression of world-view. Listening to the telling of stories of people-groups to learn their views of the world necessitates time spent on attending to their narrative.

This section of narrative draws from the writings of an Arab Palestinian psychiatrist Marwan Adeeb Dwairy. He has written about the traditional Palestinian Arab world-view and through his discussion of Arab history and current cultural practices has sought to raise the consciousness of non-Arabs working with Arabs in counselling, teaching and therapeutic roles. As a professional trained in psychiatry through the Western education system Dwairy challenges other Arab, as well as non-Arab, professionals to re-consider their own pre-suppositions, or world-views, underlying their practice in the light of understanding gained about the different world-view of the traditional Arab.

As we begin to understand the traditional Arab world-view we can begin to grasp more clearly some of our own world assumptions and pre-suppositions. We will also have cause to reflect specifically on some of the issues that may confront a Western trained and immersed educator working among students from traditional Arab backgrounds. Most importantly, we will begin to understand the breadth of issues that can confront educators when they work amongst any people with world-views different to those that have shaped their own behaviours and ways of thinking.

## NARRATIVE FOR UNDERSTANDING

When examining Arab history, four definite periods can be identified each representing a distinct layer in the Arab cultural structure (Dwairy 1997). The period preceding the emergence of Islam in AD622 found most Arabs living on the Arabian Peninsula, Syria and Iraq in tribal groups many of whom were nomads and some who were settled cultivators and tradespeople. The main cultural characteristics of the social system were authoritarianism and collectivism, and age and gender were the main factors in the authority structure. Collectivism included the nuclear and extended families as well as the whole tribe, and honour belonged to an individual through membership in a large whole. “Collectivism can … be defined as a cluster of attitudes, beliefs and behaviours toward a wide variety of people. The difference can be expressed by the range of social ‘concern’, which refers to the bonds and links with others” (Darwish and Huber, 2003, p.48).

Following the emergence of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula early in the seventh century a new empire was founded as Arab-Islamic armies conquered surrounding countries. The style of life changed during this period from predominantly nomadic to predominantly settled: trade flourished and large buildings and mosques were constructed during this time. The period from the beginning of Islam until the middle of the fifteenth century is known as the glory days of the Islamic empire (this same period is known as the ‘Dark Ages’ in European history).

> During that period new Islamic values entered Arab culture. Although Islam bought new values as well as laws to Arab society, it did not challenge its classical collectivism and authoritarianism. Collectivism and authoritarianism were no longer limited to only within the tribe but extended to the Islamic state as well. People submitted to both tribal and Islamic law within a tribal and Islamic collectivism. (Dwairy, 1998, p.8)

Arabs held a special place within the Islamic empire because the Islamic holy book (*Qura’an)* was written in Arabic and the prophet Muhammed was an Arab. Arabic language and culture became dominant and Arabic became a symbol of educational status. Known to historians as the Arab Renaissance it was during this time that Arabs contributed to knowledge in areas as diverse as

philosophy, medicine, occult sciences and alchemy and magic. Arabs focused much study during this time on the linguistics of their language in an attempt to impose rules for interpretation of their holy scriptures.

Between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries the Arabs were ruled by other nations. "During this period, the Arabic identity became distinct from the Islamic one. Arabism became the ideology of many organisations that emerged to fight for the independence of the Arabs from the Ottomans" (Dwairy, 1998, p.10). During this period of stagnation, collectivism and authoritarianism continued and enabled the Arabs, through their tribal allegiances, to resist some of the Ottoman rulers.

Since the nineteenth century the Arab world has been exposed to European culture in a variety of forms and some parts of the Arab world were ruled by Britain and France. Many Western schools brought Western values into the school curriculum. Several Arab scholars were educated in Europe and became impressed by the liberalism and humanism that emerged after the French Revolution. In the twentieth century, as a result of the development of communication and mass media, Western culture invaded almost every section of the Arab world, introducing the ideas of individualism and liberalism.

> The exposure of the Arab world to Western liberalism challenged the fundamental authoritarianism and collectivism of Arabic society. In the last two centuries, the cultural debate has focused on the questions of traditionalism versus modernity, and authenticity (*asala*) and specificity (*khususiyya*) versus Westernisation. These issues are raised in various areas; education, interpersonal relationships, familial style, entertainment, and many other social-political aspects. (Dwairy, 1998, p.11)

While varied in their political systems and economics the tensions between traditional Arab world-views and the influence of Western thinking on Arabs exist in all Arab nations.

> Despite the independence of Arab states, most Arab regimes are not democratic and are not meeting the needs of their people. Many areas are lacking basic civil institutions and services such as schools, clinics, hospitals…people feel marginalized; are not allowed to criticize the political process. (Barakat, 1993, p.270)

Barakat described features that summarise the main characteristics of the Arab world today:

> …integration of the area into the world capitalist system; social and political fragmentation; the centrality of religion, or, conversely, the loss of religious faith and return of the *jahiliy-ya*; the absence of scientific and future-oriented rationalism; repressive family socialization and neopatriachy; the subjugation of women; the dominance of traditionalism over creativity and modernity; duality of Westernisation and *salafiyya* (ancestralism); disequilibrium in the Arab ego; and the prevalence of a traditional mentality. (Barakat, 1993, p.270)

While collectivism stemmed from the early *Aljahiliyya* period, individualism emerged after exposure to Western culture. Within the collectivistic style, the individual gives up the self and obeys the will of the in-group that is represented in norms and values.

> On the personal level, living for centuries in a hierarchical society, Arabs alternate during life between these two statuses, authority or ruled, depending on age, gender, and social context. They move from being ruled as children and youngsters, to being rulers when they get older and establish families….unlike Western culture, the transition from being a ruled child (or woman) to an authority when an adult (or mother) is extreme. (Dwairy, 1998, p.18)

Dwairy describes Arabs as belonging to one of three possible groups with different levels of acculturation; the 'traditional', the 'bicultural' and the 'Westernised' groups. He further states that the majority of Arabs belong at the traditional end of the continuum, that

> the vast majority of Arabs comply with the collective values at the expense of the self and accept the hierarchical structure of authority. They still adopt authoritarian collectivism in their familial, interpersonal, and social relationships. Education and socialization in homes and schools is still authoritarian. (Dwairy, 1998, p.22)

He also maintains that it is mainly the educated middle class Arabs living in urban areas that fit into the bicultural category. The concept of a continuum of acculturation is important for educators who should be mindful that they might work with Arab students, or indeed students from any people-group, operating from across a wide spectrum of world-views.

## IMPLICATIONS OF THE TRADITIONAL ARAB WORLD-VIEW NARRATIVE FOR EDUCATORS

Two surveys conducted among Arab children and their families' revealed significant characteristics that would be largely unfamiliar to a Western educator working from a Westernised world-view approach. A survey of Arab parenting styles in the early 1990s (Dwairy, 1998) revealed the following characteristics.

- Arab parents do not tolerate deviation from their expectations.
- The most common form of socialisation methods used by parents were behavioural techniques and punishment.
- The vast majority of parents reported they would use any method to make their children adhere to authority.

In the early 1990s, a survey was conducted to determine the socialisation experiences of children in Arab schools (Dwairy, 1998). There are three significant findings from the survey that have implications for Western world-view oriented teachers.

- Arab students and teachers display violent behaviour frequently.
- Large percentages of students report a high incidence of verbal, as well as physical, violence displayed by teachers and other students.
- The most commonly applied response to violence was passivity and few students would report peer violence towards them to a teacher.

The three main methods of socialisation in Arab society are verbal methods, punishment and very little room for experimentation (Dwairy, 1998). The verbal methods employed by teachers and parents within the traditional Arabic education practice include explanation, direction and moralisation. An analysis of the content of the explanations and directions reveal that they are rule rather than being based on reasoning. Children are told what to do and how to behave and when pushed in reasoning, moral explanations based on social norms and values are given.

The expression *a'eb*, which means 'shame', or *haram*, which means 'forbidden by God', is often given to questions raised by children. The loss of face of parents in public is another strategy used by Arab parents. When verbal methods fail to prevent children from acting in a forbidden way punishments are applied as an external and direct method of control. "Physical punishment is not considered abusive and is appreciated in Arabic society" (Dwairy, 1998, p.59). Considered the most efficient method of discipline by Arab parents and teachers its over-use or abuse by a teacher is rarely challenged by an Arab parent.

Due to the need to maintain family honour and avoid causing shame to their parent Arab children have little scope for experimentation.

> Arab children do not have trial and error experiences that can help them learn about the environment and the self from the natural consequences of their behaviour. Parent's responses are the only consequences they know. Because of this, they lack the experience that helps to develop personal judgement and decision-making and problem-solving ability. (Dwairy, 1998, p.60)

How an Arab child learns is impacted on significantly by the lack of opportunity to experiment. The development of internal self-control, a feature valued highly in Western educational settings where the focus is on an individual's growth and development, does not occur for children growing up within the traditional Arab world-view. The parents and the tribe provide the external control mechanisms on behavioural choices. "Since the consequences of behaviour are determined by the parents and the social environment, these external factors, rather than inner self-control, control behaviour in the Arab society" (Dwairy, 1998, p.61).

An educator with a Western world-view is likely to view many of the behaviours described above from an individualist viewpoint and with a limited understanding of the world-view scaffolding of traditional Arab culture. An educator operating from the typical Western position, for example, that students have a range of behavioural choices and are personally accountable for their actions would struggle to understand the violent behaviour of their traditional Arab students.

The Western theory of locus of control, for example, that proposes that people operate from either a largely internal or externally driven locus of control, does not accommodate the traditional Arab world-view or experience. Such a theory assumes an individual to have grown in a culture where high value is placed on the development of an internal locus of control, a feature common to Western individualistic oriented societies. We have seen from the narrative above that traditionally raised Arab children find their behaviours are controlled by external agencies. This is an effective way of maintaining the collectivist world-view and making the family the central and controlling feature in an Arab's life. A collective will have little power over a person who does not ascribe power to it and from infancy an Arab child has learnt of the power of their collective through their own and, observation of other's, experiences.

Another feature of Arab students that would puzzle an educator working from a Western world-view is their conformist and dependent behaviour. In Western society where independence is highly regarded dependence is likewise interpreted as immaturity. In a society that does not encourage individual independence and where conditions support conformism, conformity and dependency are natural results. They are a mature way to adapt and survive in the social system (Dwairy, 1998). Classroom practices that do not take account of this strong tendency to conformity may challenge and disorient a student resulting in behaviour that is puzzling to the teacher and also affects the learning of the student.

Children brought up within the traditional Arab custom have been found to have exceptionally good memories for facts and rote learning is a common feature in Arab classrooms. Dwairy (1998) found that Arab children perform poorly in tests that require flexibility and analytical thinking. When asked to compare two concepts, for example, to find a similar property or when offered problematic situations and asked how they would respond, Arab children performed poorly when compared to their non-Arab peers. Having had little opportunity to evaluate a problem and make a personal decision Arab children find such questions difficult. Learning has focused on being told the right answer and there is little to no practice in analysing and reasoning a problem.

## SUMMARY COMMENTS

The above brief and, in many ways, simplistic narrative of the world-view of the traditional Arab is one example of a world-view that is quite distinct from that of the Western world-view. It has taken the reader some time to read the narrative and further time to begin to understand a view of learning and the world that is a stark contrast to Western views of such matters.

In listening to the narrative of one people group, we may have begun to gain insights that will inform the practice of teachers who work cross culturally in educational settings. The story of the traditional Arab provides an example of the critical need for teaching practitioners to understand the world from the point of view of the students. Arising from this understanding a teacher can gain insights into how students learn, why they may behave in particular ways and the place of the family (in its widest sense) in an individual student's life and learning.

Understanding the world-views of their students will assist a teacher to understand how the particular assumptions to learning, knowledge and behaviour brought by him or her to the classroom may clash with those of the students, the students' parents and the wider cultural milieu in which the school is sited. The world-view of the traditional Arab is only one example of a world-view that is in a clear contrast to the world-views of teachers who have grown and been educated within a Western society. Teachers who work within other cultural settings, for example, Asian cultures, indigenous Australian cultures, or within Pacific Island cultures will encounter students operating from world-views different to that of their own. Outside the scope of this discussion but important for future discussion are questions surrounding the pedagogical and curriculum decisions as well as classroom management strategies teachers make when working within a cultural setting different to their own. Teachers who work, for example, in a traditional Arab school setting may be faced with issues of violence between student and student and between student and teacher that occur within a cultural context that is accepting of behaviour that would be condemned in a Western school setting.

As teachers explore their own world-view narrative and begin to develop an appreciation of their view of the world, of 'the way things are' they will have a heightened awareness of the assumptions underlying their educational practices. With the increasing flow of people between nations teachers will require intercultural competencies hitherto undemanded. The need for teaching practitioners and pre-service teachers to develop self-understanding and self-awareness has never before been so critical. The current developments within pre-service and teacher professional development of the reflective practitioner model will contribute in some way to the formation of critically self aware teaching practitioners. Further developments in teacher education are needed to equip teachers to work ethically and with skills of critical reflection in a global setting where educational practice and theory vary from culture to culture.

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