

# The Hidden Politics of 'Harmony' Celebrations: Where Has All the Racism Gone?

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## Celebrations in early childhood education

Celebrations are an important part of early childhood education. Christmas, Easter, Anzac Day, Sorry Day and other celebrations give children opportunities to learn about various aspects of society and how as a national community we celebrate culture. In recent years, however, early childhood educators have questioned 'traditional' approaches to celebrations, holidays and festivals in early childhood education, arguing that they can have unintended negative consequences, from encouraging commercialism to excluding minority cultures (Dau, 2001; Dau and Jones, 2004).

This critique has also been extended to celebrations that aim to be culturally inclusive, such as Chinese New Year or Eid el Fitr, with educators cautioning against exoticism and tokenism. With the emphasis on exotic aspects of culture such as food, music and dress, celebrations can decontextualise cultures and fail to show children how people live their daily lives. As Barnes (2001, p 162) writes:

*When celebrations are focused on too narrowly, a 'tourist approach' to planning begins to emerge, where children visit the different before returning to the norm, with the norm reflecting the values and practices of the dominant culture. Unconsciously, this approach may create stereotypes, rather than challenge them, becoming a token gesture rather than an authentic representation of diversity.*

This chapter explores similar questions in relation to 'harmony' celebrations, to show how even events supposedly designed to be inclusive can reinforce a view of society that excludes the experiences of many in our diverse society. It examines the history of the concept of 'harmony' as it is currently used in multicultural policy and analyses the underlying politics and values of what may seem to be a simple and uncontroversial concept. Finally this chapter demonstrates that celebrations in early childhood education bear the direct effects of government policy.

## Harmony Day

Harmony Day occurs on 21 March each year. It was introduced in 1999 to celebrate 'Australia's success as a diverse society united by a common set of values', according to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC, 2009). Harmony Day is part of the government's *Living in Harmony* program, which funds organisations to carry out community events on the theme of cultural diversity and harmony. It is the central plank of the government's multicultural affairs brief.

Many of the funded projects focus on children and young people, and often encourage participation in arts, sports or school exchange projects designed to increase inter-cultural communication and awareness. For example, in 2007 the Oasis Child Care Centre in South Australia, which has many enrolments by newly arrived migrants, was funded to run a playgroup involving 'community participation and networking with other agencies to educate and promote life skills for families from refugee backgrounds' (DIAC, 2008). The project aimed to 'build positive community relations, develop an opportunity for participation and create a sense of belonging as well as provide the opportunity to further develop an understanding of Australian values and the English language' (DIAC, 2008). Other projects funded in 2007 included the Riverina Community College's 'Hip Hop for Harmony', targeting local young people of diverse backgrounds, and Ashfield Public School's 'New Horizons, Building Cross Cultural Community Bridges', which saw the school become a hub for activities including forums on 'Australian values, community cooperation, respect and participation' (DIAC, 2008). So it is not uncommon to see orange ribbons and multicultural celebrations in early childhood settings for Harmony Day.

The concept of harmony has an important role to play in a culturally diverse society such as Australia. In addition, these kinds of experiences can be valuable in teaching and learning about cultural difference in a positive, non-threatening way. But, what is being left out in this focus on 'harmony'?

While Australia celebrates Harmony Day, elsewhere around the world March 21st is known as the 'United Nations Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination'. This was a deliberate renaming on the part of the then Howard government.

## From racial discrimination to harmony?

What is the significance of this re-badging? We have moved from an action-oriented concept that specifies a social evil to be tackled, to arguably a bland call for everyone to sing from the same song sheet. Harmony activities are generally positive, 'feel good' events, where 'negative' concepts like racism and discrimination are sidelined in favour of a focus on togetherness, integration and cooperation. While the latter are important values, their dominance can

prevent more challenging issues from being discussed. In addition, issues such as racism are silenced because the perception is perpetuated that 'doing Harmony Day' is a sufficient anti-racist curriculum. Holding forums that are framed in terms of community cooperation and Australian values may prevent people from minority cultures from discussing their experiences of discrimination. For example, projects that encourage children to cook dishes from various cultures, or to form inter-cultural soccer teams, do not easily allow for participants to recognise that inter-cultural relations are typically characterised by inequality and hierarchy (Robinson and Jones Díaz, 2006; Rhedding-Jones, 2005). Not all cultures exist on a level playing field. Arguably, this depoliticising impact was precisely the aim of the Howard government's harmony agenda.

An examination of the *Living in Harmony* program, with a particular focus on the changes in its framing and language since its inception in 1998, tells us a lot about the evolution of the government's approach to multicultural policy under Howard. One of the most striking changes in the program since its inception has been the gradual marginalisation of the concept of 'racism' and eventual removal of the word. At the launch of the *Living in Harmony* program in 1998, it was described as the Federal government's 'anti-racism campaign'. Then Immigration Minister, Philip Ruddock, said it was designed to 'build upon the cohesiveness of the Australian society and make it clear that there is no place for racism in Australia' (Ruddock, 1998).

This emphasis on anti-racism characterised the first few years of the program. In 2001 Ruddock stated that the *Living in Harmony* grants were going to projects designed to 'attack racism and promote community harmony' (Ruddock, 2001). He added that 'Racism is offensive to all Australians. It prevents people from actively participating in our society and from contributing their talents and skills to our development as a nation' (DIMA, 2001).

By 2003, the concept of 'harmony' had moved to the foreground, and 'racism' to the background. Funding was increasingly going to projects framed not in terms of addressing racism in a structured way, for example, in the media or other institutions, but much more de-politicised projects, for example, multicultural arts and crafts or inter-faith dialogue. For those not familiar with the concept, inter-faith dialogue usually involves groups of Christians, Muslims and Jews (other faiths are rarely represented), meeting to discuss their respective religious beliefs. Groups usually also visit each other's places of worship, and celebrate others' religious festivals. The 2001 September 11 attacks led to a proliferation of inter-faith dialogue, and the Federal government began to invest huge amounts of money in it from 2003, when it accounted for almost half of all projects funded (DIMA, 2006a).

Of course these projects have their value, but when these kinds of 'feel good', arguably uncritical, events dominate, we end up with a potentially superficial and individualistic approach that prevents us from looking at structural issues of power, for example, how racism is institutionalised within society.

In the last few years, the integrationist logic has been even stronger in government discourse. Compare the following paragraphs of the *Living in Harmony* Guidelines from 2005 and 2006:

- 2005: *'Its centrepiece is a community grants program providing funding for projects designed to enhance community harmony and reduce racism and bigotry'* (DIMIA, 2005, p 3, *emphasis added*)
- 2006: *'Its centrepiece is a programme of funding for community projects designed to engage the whole community in promoting Australian values and mutual obligation, as well as address issues of cultural, religious and racial intolerance in Australia'* (DIMA, 2006b, p 3, *emphasis added*)

The words 'racism' and 'bigotry' are gone, replaced by a call to promote Australian values and the 'obligation' of migrants to integrate into mainstream society. Even the word 'multiculturalism' has disappeared from government documents, as was evident in the renaming of the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs. The new 'Department of Immigration and Citizenship' reflected an integrationist push away from valuing cultural diversity. In its final years, the Howard government gradually eradicated the word 'multiculturalism' from all policy documents, replacing it with terms such as harmony.

More recently, the Rudd Labor government took multicultural policy in a different direction. In 2009 the Living in Harmony program was replaced by the 'Diverse Australia Program'. Although Harmony Day is still an 'integral part' of the program, the new emphasis is on 'dealing with cultural, racial and religious intolerance' (DIAC, 2009). This is an improvement in that it specifies a social problem to be addressed rather than just promoting abstract notions of togetherness, and it foregrounds the concept of diversity rather than integration. This is a small part of the shift in political values in the post-Howard era although, overall, promoting multiculturalism does not appear to be a major priority for the Labor government, as seen in the distinct lack of fanfare associated with the launch of the Diverse Australia Program.

While harmony celebrations in early childhood curriculum are part of a vast number of grassroots activities around the country, and are usually not government funded, it is important to examine the policy context and history of local projects, as they can be framed in ways that emphasise some values and not others.



#### QUESTIONS FOR CRITICAL REFLECTION

- What are the values and politics that underpin harmony celebrations in early childhood education?
- What issues may be sidelined by the heavy focus on 'harmony' rather than 'racism'?
- What other kinds of practices can be included in early childhood curriculum to explore cultural difference and respect as an everyday experience?
- What can we learn from communities about the importance of celebrations and how they are experienced?
- What will you do differently?

## References

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### End note

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