

MEPs Effect: The social cohesion and inclusion determiner

The relative inclusion or exclusion of individuals in society can be explained by the MEPs effect; that is the combined effect of Media, Education and Politics intersecting and creating a lived reality for any group in the community. MEPs helps to explain why some groups in society are privileged with acceptance and equality, while other groups will continue to struggle for their equality and inclusion in mainstream society.

An example of the MEPs effect can be seen if we consider national discourse on Australia's Muslim community- or communities- which is far from a one-dimensional, homogenous group. Consider the negative media discourse that continuously propagates highly controversial stories on everything from border security, national security to immigration and even the rare practise of Muslim polygamy. All of these stories seek to paint a picture of an Australia in danger of being swamped by Islamic terrorists, despite the fact that the majority of victims of Islamic terrorists are Muslims themselves who have played a much more significant role in curbing and resisting the rise of Islamic fundamentalism than any other group or military. Given such sensationalised media coverage, one dares to ask the question, 'How can the average Australian- who often has minimal exposure to this diverse group in society, tolerate and accept Australian Muslims whom they have been taught are dangerous, unpatriotic terrorists with malign intentions?.'

It is the role of education perhaps to help us to resist the divisive devices used by profit driven media who engage in sensationalism to keep people anxiously reading, buying and subscribing to their services. Education is after all, meant to create literate, informed citizens who are capable of both assessing and resisting the biased written word or propaganda. Unfortunately, for the Australian Muslim community and social cohesion for us all, the Australian Curriculum, while amending a few outcomes that propagate negative discourse on Islam and Muslims, has still failed to educate the average Australian about the diverse Muslim communities living amongst them. The incorporation of the lived experiences of other minority groups into the Australian curriculum such as indigenous, European and Asian identities has made it much easier for the rest of Australia to identify with and accept these minority groups. For example, even if an Australian has never met an Aboriginal, they still generally understand their experiences due to the incorporation of indigenous history and narratives into the Australian Curriculum. This leads to both empathy and greater scrutiny towards dehumanising discourse on indigenous Australians as may sometimes occur with media cartoons or political comments. The incorporation of European experiences since WW1 in both the History and English curriculums has also made anti-Semitism intolerable in Australian society with studies on Asia also helping Australians to identify more with their once suspicious neighbours.

Considering that the majority of mortalities within the last century due to war, genocide, terrorism and economic sanctions have had Islamic identities, understanding the lived experiences and histories of Australian Muslim groups is a very much overlooked topic. While the new Modern History Stage 6 curriculum includes some outcomes that cover the Iraq and Afghan wars, they predominantly cover events in terms of numbers and do little to educate about the human loss and

trauma, Iraqi and Afghan refugees have endured. This is quite surprising given Australia's significant role in the Iraq and Afghan wars that helped destabilize these countries, allowing ISIS and al-Qaida to sprout and flourish. It is also dehumanizing to such migrants who were portrayed as barbaric, ready to throw their children overboard in order to reach Australian shores during the secretive and politically manoeuvred 2001 Children Overboard crisis which allowed the Liberal Party to exploit anxious voters.

Connect this to Pauleen Hanson's and many other politicians endless demonization of Australian Muslims and Islam through political rhetoric that effectively paints all Muslims with the same tainted brush and you have the three MEPs factors ensuring that Australian Muslims remain marginalized and disadvantaged in Australia compared to other groups. The MEPs effect also means that social cohesion and inclusion is jeopardized and the benefits of multiculturalism are undermined. Asking for real leadership on this issue seems to be a real struggle given the current political climate, as seen with the increasing right-wing radical groups emerging in Australia, threatening Islamic places and individuals. Surely, we can hold constructive conversations on national security and border protection without harnessing racial attacks, race riots and civil unrest through virulent political speeches? Yet generalizing about Australian Muslims is not the only irresponsible rhetoric Australian politicians have repeatedly exhibited but even ensuring that the average Australia remains suspicious of the Muslim dress, confusing the hijab (a versatile head covering worn by many Muslim females) and a niqab (a face and hair covering worn by a minority of Muslim females). This results in not just alienation of Australian Muslims but greater discrimination for Muslim women in public spaces and in the workforce, compounding any gender inequality experienced and discrimination for any non-Muslim Australian who is coincidentally olive skinned and sporting facial hair.

The cumulative MEPs effect has normalized racism and discrimination in Australian society while undermining the Australian core value of giving individuals a 'fair go' and it has also ensured that the very individuals that can share their unique insight on prominent national discourse on immigration, border protection and national security remain too busy asserting their right to simply exist in our multicultural society and effectively invisible where their voices are concerned. Counteracting the MEPs effect requires holding the media, education system and politicians accountable for misinformation and neglect of their responsibilities, otherwise we risk compromising our future social stability, harmony and progression as a pluralistic, multicultural, democratic society.