1.2 Australian culture

Most definitions of culture include as a major theme the shared practices, knowledge, beliefs, customs and social practices of a group of people passed on from one generation to another. These shared knowledge, belief and values systems are not necessarily obvious or articulated, but work below the surface shaping how people think and act.

As an overseas trained teacher, you will be attempting to recognise some of the underlying beliefs and practices that make up ‘Australian culture’. This complex process may be somewhat superficial at first as you rely on general impressions and observations. However as time passes, everyday life will allow Australian cultural mores and expectations to become increasingly familiar.

Australia is often described as an egalitarian, classless society in which everybody is entitled to be treated fairly — that is, be given ‘a fair go’ — and where friends can expect unquestioned loyalty from each other — that is, fulfill the obligations of ‘mateship’. Linked to the egalitarian view of society is a tendency to be skeptical about authority and the notion of complying with rules. This is sometimes referred to as ‘larrikinism’. Australians see themselves as having a dry and laconic sense of humour that is characterised by the use of irony and an ability to laugh at themselves.

While the reality of Australian society can be quite different, these characteristics are seen as fundamental to the Australian identity and come out in the way that people talk about what it is to be Australian. These characteristics also come through in some movies, television programs and pieces of writing by, or about, Australians.

These characteristics also manifest themselves in schools. For example, teachers tend to have an egalitarian view of the school hierarchy and are not in awe of those who hold positions of authority in the school such as principals, assistant and deputy principals, executive or head teachers. Authority is not necessarily inherent in the positions themselves. Rather there is an expectation that school leaders will demonstrate that they are capable and competent, thereby earning the respect of the teaching staff.

This egalitarian view extends to non-teaching staff as well. Successful teachers treat school administrative support staff (SASS) as professionals whose role are different to theirs, and is essential for the efficient functioning of the school.

Another example of the Australian identity at work in the school relates to teacher/student interactions. Students will complain if they feel that they have not been given ‘a fair go’. They will not agree with, or support, you (especially in matters of discipline) if they perceive that their action would be disloyal to a friend. They are unlikely to tell you about the misbehaviour of fellow students (known as ‘dobbing’) because this goes against notions of mateship.