The Quest for Educational Equity in Schools in Multicultural Australia

Greg Noble & Megan Watkins

Australia's migration history has produced one of the most ethnically diverse nations in the world, but this has presented challenges for educational equity. The introduction of multiculturalism in the 1970s coincided with an increasing focus on structural inequities in education. In this essay, we examine the context of changing educational policies and programs over the last half century, arguing that there has not been a steady process of reform involving measures redressing various inequalities but a period of policy turbulence. We consider the impact of the competing logics of multiculturalism – incorporation, recognition, civility – upon educational policy and practice to argue that, together with the consequences of neoliberal reforms, the equitable delivery of multiculturalism in schools has proved challenging. We conclude that multicultural education must refocus on the critical capacities that teachers and students alike need to understand the cultural complexities of a globalized world.

Central to Australia's self-image is the idea that it is an egalitarian, democratic, and inclusive society.[1] A core element of that self-image is the popular claim that "Australia is the most successful multicultural society in the world."[2] It is no wonder then that policies of multicultural education have become increasingly central to goals of educational and social equity in Australia. Yet multicultural education and other policy interventions targeting disadvantage are historically recent interventions.[3] Considering Australia's past – premised on exclusionary immigration practices and the dispossession of the land's original inhabitants – as well as its present – in which neoliberal policies have reshaped educational systems and understandings of equity – the relations between multiculturalism, equity, and schooling are complex and contradictory.

We examine the place of multicultural education in the quest for educational equity in the context of Australia's ethnic diversity.[4] We consider first the broader social contexts of the emergence of multiculturalism in a settler-colonial nation before discussing the educational contexts of Australia's schooling systems. We then explore the responses to ethnic diversity in Australia, with a particular focus on the state of New South Wales (NSW), both in terms of broader policies and

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programs and the specific school and classroom challenges that arise from the increasingly "superdiverse" nature of Australian society. We argue that the celebratory nature of multicultural education often serves to mask these complexities and ignores the critical, intellectual understandings students and teachers now require.

As one of the few nations that have embraced multiculturalism as government policy at national, state, and local levels, Australia has an extensive and complex migration history derived from its British roots and its location in the Asia-Pacific region. Over one-quarter of its population of twenty-seven million was born overseas, while more than half has a parent that was born overseas, representing more than three hundred ancestries and over four hundred languages.[5] Historically, Australia's migration has been dominated by arrivals from the United Kingdom and New Zealand. Since World War II, however, Australia's program expanded to include more people from across Europe, the Middle East, and beyond. In the last thirty years, migration programs have changed dramatically, such that India and China are now the largest sources of migrants, altering the ethnic and linguistic composition of the nation. This has been compounded by the influx of refugee and asylum seeker populations from Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia.

This transformation is a recent phenomenon. With their foundation as a destination for British convicts, and then as a key element in British colonial ambitions, the original Australian colonies had been largely the preserve of white settlers. With the economic boom in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the ensuing influx of Chinese migrants and Pacific Islander labor, the colonies began introducing restrictive, race-based immigration laws. When Australia was federated in 1901, the Immigration Restriction Bill was one of the first pieces of legislation in the new Commonwealth of Australia. Now referred to as the White Australia Policy, these restrictions remained until after World War II, and were only slowly dismantled in the following decades until the policy was formally ended by Prime Minister Gough Whitlam's Labor government in 1972.[6]

The historical transformation from racially exclusive and assimilationist immigration programs to policies that embrace multiculturalism and ethnic pluralism is complex, but it was both dramatic and partial. As many scholars have argued, though it followed in the wake of the Canadian experience, multiculturalism was a "compromise" policy formation designed to placate increasingly vocal ethnic organizations and to allay the fears of dominant cultural groups whilst also addressing different social and economic imperatives.[7] The move to multiculturalism was driven more by economic and demographic needs, with successive governments being captive to a "populate or perish" mentality and a fear that migrants would not stay. This resulted in the need to increasingly widen the pool of source nations for the migration program, contributing to the growth of ethnic community or-

ganizations that were beginning to experience some degree of electoral sway.[8] Although initiated by the Labor government in the early 1970s, multiculturalism was formalized by the succeeding conservative coalition Fraser government, informed by several important reports. The 1977 report by the Australian Ethnic Affairs Council, *Australia as a Multicultural Society*, and the 1978 Galbally Report on migrant programs and services entrenched what became the key components in policies: the (often competing) emphases on social cohesion, equal access, and the right to maintain cultural identity.[9]

There have been many voices of opposition and moments of crisis during the life of Australia's multiculturalism, including two long periods of conservative government that stepped away from endorsing, or even using the word, multiculturalism.[10] Politically, multiculturalism has always been contested, subject to frequent renegotiation, portrayed as both a threat to the nation's identity and social cohesion and its savior.[11] Yet, over fifty years, there has been large and widespread popular support for both Australia's diversified immigration program and policies of multiculturalism, a level of support that continues today.[12]

One aspect of this contestation is the degree of confusion over what multiculturalism means. This is partly because of the ongoing tension between multiculturalism as a simple description of ethnic diversity and the prescriptive policies that embody an agenda of change and a vision of Australian society different from traditional perceptions. It is also partly because multiculturalism is not one thing but an ensemble of policies and practices that entail different "logics" of equity – of incorporation (acquiring the skills to participate in Australian society), recognition (the "rights" of cultural maintenance), and civility (learning how to live in a shared social space).[13] These logics were present from the beginning, but whatever balance existed was arguably unsettled by the rise of what is often referred to as "identity politics" (largely middle class), alongside the increasing presence of right-wing nationalism in Australian political life in the 1990s.[14] We'll return to the consequences of what this means for education, but we wish to emphasize here that conceptual confusion, in addition to the emergence of neoliberal economic and social policies since the 1980s, contributes to a high level of turbulence in policy and practice around issues of diversity.

Whitlam's reforming government introduced a range of other policies and programs aimed at addressing social disadvantage regarding gender, rural communities, and Indigenous Australians. While these are not our focus, it is important that we note the uncomfortable relation between multiculturalism and Indigenous affairs and parallel issues around culture and disadvantage.[15] Aboriginal activists have long argued that the first peoples should not be collapsed into policies addressing migrant-derived diversity.[16] Despite the overlapping concerns around issues of recognition, ethnically based inequalities, and racism,

the history of the original inhabitants of the land – who have occupied the continent for sixty thousand years – positions them differently within Australian society. This is reflected in different, if parallel, institutional histories. Now numbering approximately one million, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders represent 3.8 percent of Australia's population, most of whom live in cities and towns (15 percent live in remote communities).[17] For most of the period since European settlement, policies targeting Indigenous inhabitants were defined by dispossession, eradication, "protection," and assimilation. In 1967, when a national referendum decided that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples would be counted as part of the Australian population, giving the national government (rather than state governments) the major power to make laws regarding Indigenous Australians, an Office of Aboriginal Affairs was established. In 1972, under Whitlam, the office was extended into a government department. The 1970s were, as with multiculturalism, the decade when policies of assimilation gave way to an emphasis on recognition and cultural maintenance in Indigenous affairs.[18] Since then, policies have been reshaped in terms of questions of recognition, self-determination, land rights, and treaty. The reasons for the failure of the recent referendum to institutionalize in the Constitution an Aboriginal Voice to Parliament are hotly debated, but it reflects at least a lack of agreement over the means to address Indigenous marginalization in Australia.[19] Despite the many differences – and the specificity of the experiences of Aboriginal Australians – Indigenous-affairs and multicultural policies share a degree of policy complexity. Indigenous-affairs policies have also been constantly torn between competing discourses of equity – between the desire to pursue social and economic equality and the path of self-determination. The first implies an emphasis on integration and the second foregrounds the right to inhabit different social worlds.[20]

A common issue in these two domains is the tendency to ignore the cultural complexity that has resulted from the dynamics of globalization, reshaping institutions, relations, and practices.[21] A consequence of this complexity is that Australia is increasingly defined by the phenomenon of superdiversity, which refers not simply to the diversification of sizable ethnoracial populations, but to the dynamic interplay of social factors, such as mixed marriage and cultural intermixing. These processes affect long-time, migrant, and Indigenous Australians alike and challenge the common assumptions about the homogenized nature of ethnically or racially defined communities.[22] These domains are both prone to forms of essentialism that don't correspond to the realities of social life and therefore pose significant challenges for classroom practice and teacher training. It is the task of a *critical* multiculturalism to unpack and contextualize such essentialisms.[23]

The challenges of managing the consequences of ethnic diversity are central to the goals of schooling, but these goals are not always straightforward. Typically, education is seen as providing a mechanism for greater social

equality, not just through enhancing access but also in improving the outcomes of students from an array of disadvantaged backgrounds. Yet it is also a mechanism of social and economic reproduction, including the reproduction of relations of power, through the unequal distribution of knowledge, skills, opportunities, and qualifications. For some commentators, the goal of equity has been implicit in Australia since the acts of the 1870s that introduced free, compulsory, and secular education, though these changes had more to do with the economic, social, and political imperatives of governing.[24] The same could be said of the introduction of mass public secondary schooling after World War II, even as equity issues became more prominent in educational discourse.[25] This contradiction underlies the ongoing tension in what educational equity means – whether it is about resourcing, outcomes, standards of competence, equality of opportunity, inclusive curriculum, or excellence.[26] These are important practical debates for public education, because disadvantaged students of various orders of disadvantage are disproportionately located in government schools.[27]

This is especially so for students of minority backgrounds. Schools have become a key means of recognizing and including students of all ethnic backgrounds, and yet they do so through limited, problematic means. The ethnic and racial diversity of schools varies enormously, of course.[28] Subsequently, some schools don't always see multiculturalism as a pressing matter for them.[29] Yet the task of equipping students with the knowledge they need to make sense of the cultural complexity of a globalized world should be central to the goals of equity.

Despite the importance of equity discourses, the goals of educational equity are still a long way from being achieved. Australia's education system, once rated among the world's best, has been sliding down international rankings of student outcomes for several decades, with effects experienced unevenly.[30] In this context, we have seen gaps in school achievement, literacy, and completion rates widen between the highest and lowest achievers, which maps onto social divisions between rich and poor, white and Black, urban and rural, and different ethnic groups.[31] A central challenge in addressing these divisions is the tension between competing levels of governmental organization of educational systems.

In Australia, schooling – indeed, education generally – is primarily a matter of state government jurisdiction regulated by state government laws.[32] This was largely due to the states' origins as separate colonies, with different histories of settlement and economic development. With the creation of the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901 – whose constitution was an act of the British Parliament – education remained a state power. Effectively, each state has its own school system with variations between them.[33] This has not stopped the national government from being involved in education matters, producing a somewhat disjointed, "concurrent" federalism.[34] Governing became increasingly centralized and

systematized during the twentieth century, primarily through the national government's increasing control of taxation and therefore the funding of state budgets.[35] The reformist Whitlam government of the 1970s, crucial to the foundation of modern policies on multiculturalism and other areas of social justice, reframed educational policy in terms of a national quest for equality of opportunity, and saw education as a principal means by which forms of social and economic disadvantage could be ameliorated.[36] This government saw the creation of the Disadvantaged Schools Program (focusing on schools from poorer areas), the development of English as a second language programs, and the establishment of Community Languages Schools.[37] It also introduced programs for girls and for rural and Indigenous education.[38]

But this degree of intervention has caused tensions between national and state governments in terms of the directions of schooling, especially when different political parties control different levels of government. An example of such tension has been the Australian Government's stuttering attempts since 2006 to introduce a national curriculum. This has been embroiled in constant revision as state governments and state teaching organizations have resisted the attempt by a series of Liberal-National Party governments to introduce a conservative curriculum. Caught up in the "culture wars" of recent decades, with competing narratives of the nation's past, identity, and values, its implementation was watered down and uneven across the states.[39] This national curriculum attempted to introduce the idea of intercultural understanding as one of the key skills schools should foster, but was at odds with the prevailing language of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism was also caught between two levels of government in Australia, with departments and policies established in both systems (as was the case with Indigenous affairs), which has consequences for educational policy.

In addition to the conflict between levels of government, there is also tension between the two systems of government and nongovernment schooling. From the early days of the colonies, there existed government institutions for the children of convicts and free settlers, private schools for elites, and Native Institutions for the Indigenous. The increasing systematization of state education systems did not remove these differences. Today, nongovernment components of schooling include highly privileged schools (known as Great Public Schools), Catholic systemic schools (largely for the Catholic working class), and an increasing number of independent schools (many of which are faith-based). As part of the Whitlam government's emphasis on equal opportunity, the increase in national funding was partly aimed at the Catholic system and its working-class and migrant populations.[40] One of the ironies of this decision was that nongovernment schools could access public funding, which contributed to the subsequent growth of independent schools.[41]

Despite the intentions of successive national governments to produce more equitable funding arrangements over the last decade or so, these earlier chang-

es enshrined public funding for private schools, often at the expense of public schools and disadvantaged students.[42] As a consequence, the proportion of students attending government schools has declined significantly since the 1970s, including a drop of 5 percent in the last two decades, to 64.5 percent of all students, much lower than the average of 80 percent among OECD countries.[43]

The growth of private schooling is part of a larger process of the neoliberal marketization of education. While equity was typically framed in terms of access and opportunity (rather than equality of outcomes, which was often the focus of academic research), this approach reframed equity in terms of choice. The neoliberal promise of greater choice and freedom in the educational marketplace, however, produces significant tensions around teacher and parent responsibility and increasingly punitive regimes of accountability.[44]

While the number of nongovernment schools has increased significantly, there has also been growth in high-achievement programs that have further complicated relations between ethnicity and educational inequalities. Notably, there have been new programs for high-achieving students – such as opportunity classes, gifted and talented programs, and selective high schools (especially in New South Wales) – and the proliferation of commercial tutoring services. This growth has been enmeshed with the opening of educational markets, both locally and internationally, and the targeting of particular groups of students, often those from overseas or of migrant origin.[45] While ethnicity was once deemed a marker of disadvantage, new cohorts of migrants, especially from South and East Asia, arrive with significant amounts of educational capital. Though there are still students of various ethnic backgrounds who experience educational disadvantage – such as migrant communities from the Middle East and Pacific Islands, and students of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds – other students from Chinese and Indian backgrounds have come to dominate those programs for high achievers.[46]

This turbulence is consequently seen in the juxtaposition of competing goals and programs in education. The language of access, equity, cultural recognition, and community harmony jostles with that of the market and accountability. Further complications emerge given the varying emphases of Australia's state- and territory-based education systems that draw on the national curriculum to differing degrees, attentive to the specificities of school communities within their own jurisdictions. Across Australia, the different equity logics of multiculturalism – incorporation, recognition, and civility – while all present, inform policies and practices in different ways. Most of these policies refer to multicultural education by name, focusing on migrant-derived diversity in schools or, as in the case of Queensland, subsume this within a policy of inclusive education that addresses the needs of various equity groups: students from culturally and linguistically di-

verse backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, those from LGBTQIA+ communities, and students with disabilities.[47]

A key element of multicultural education is the English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D) programs provided in each state and territory.[48] Support in English language and literacy has long been the mainstay of multicultural education in Australia, a perceived need in terms of educational access and equity in an Anglophone nation.[49] We frame such programs of multicultural education as representative of a logic of incorporation, not in the sense of older notions of assimilation and integration, but as state support for acquiring the requisite skills for participation within Australian schools and society more broadly. Such programs sit alongside an array of others around settlement assistance and transition to school for recent migrants and refugees and their families in public schools.[50]

While the reach and effectiveness of EAL/D support is a matter of some debate, examined more closely in the context of the NSW education system, languages other than English receive far less government support. Despite the richness of Australia's linguistic diversity, including hundreds of languages and dialects spoken among the many diasporas together with over two hundred fifty Indigenous languages, language loss is a significant issue.[51] This is a function of various factors. Processes of colonization and dispossession have led to the demise or restricted use of many Indigenous languages, and migrants face various hurdles in relation to their children's maintenance of their mother tongue, often competing with English, which is prioritized above other languages.[52] Languages other than English are generally studied for academic purposes in secondary school, though with increasingly declining numbers, and bilingual education in various migrant languages is something of a rarity in Australian schools, especially within the public system.[53] The diversity of languages in use in Australia makes decisions to introduce language instruction extremely difficult.

As a result, maintenance of mother-tongue languages among migrants generally falls to community-language schools that operate outside school hours, are staffed by community members, and are funded by grants from state governments and migrant communities themselves, with some charging nominal fees. The benefits of mother tongue maintenance are well documented, not only psychological benefits and maintaining familial ties with older generations, including those remaining in the country of origin, but also the educational benefits of proficiency in a student's first language, especially if it involves not only speaking but reading and writing, as these skills provide a strong basis for learning additional languages.[54] Such language maintenance, along with the retention of homeland customs and faith-based practices, is a tenet of multiculturalism, indicative of a logic of recognition. But in terms of practices of multicultural education in schools, there

is often a tension between these differing logics of recognition and incorporation, such as between ensuring EAL/D learners' timely acquisition of English language and literacy and the retention and development of their mother tongue. As indicated, multiculturalism is not simply descriptive of the ethnic pluralism of Australia's population but pertains to the forms of governance that manage this diversity of which schools play a pivotal role. As with the nation as a whole, schools are faced with what education scholar Brian Bullivant, in the early years of Australian multiculturalism, termed the "pluralist dilemma," balancing the rights of ethnic minorities and those of the nation as a broader collective.[55]

While recognition is important in terms of various scales and modes of belonging in school, the broader community, and the nation, there is conflict and ambiguity around what recognition involves. What is it that schools are "recognizing"? Many policies related to multicultural education still operate with quite reduced notions of ethnicity or "culture" as being discrete and singular, and they lack conceptual clarity in how to approach these concepts. For example, one of the three elements of the national curriculum's treatment of intercultural understanding is "recognising culture and developing respect." While there are references to cultural variability and the dynamism of cultural practice at points in the learning continuum, spanning the early years of school through to the later years of high school, this complexity is usually factored into the later stages of schooling after students have already formulated more bounded notions of culture. Moreover, the very meaning of culture is itself not interrogated, leaving much to teachers' own interpretation of a field of knowledge they may have little or no expertise in.[56]

Given these limitations, a persistent essentialism tends to prevail in practices of multicultural education in schools, evident in curriculum and events, such as the ubiquitous multicultural day, when stereotypical representations of the "cultures" of students and their families are benignly celebrated. With an emphasis on ethnic difference and little acknowledgment of cultural complexity or affinity, such activities, while well-intentioned, engage in forms of misrecognition, othering students in contrast to an assumed Anglo mainstream. In contexts of superdiversity, complexity is now characteristic of many school communities and warrants more insightful examination within classrooms. Students need the skills for critically unpacking the cultural complexity of the world, looking at how culture involves far more than ethnicity or race, intersecting with various influences, such as class, gender, religion, sexuality, and age, that may prove more significant in students' lives and educational outcomes. This is not to say that ethnic heritage is not important – it is, especially in terms of informing differing perspectives that challenge the dominance of an Anglocentric view. But the complexities of what recognition entails is too often neglected, pigeonholing students in terms of cultural types that run counter to educational equity.

What we term a logic of civility is also related to the imperative of recognition. As is evident from the national curriculum, "recognising culture" is coupled with "developing respect." Such an ethics toward difference was deemed essential in multicultural policy for embracing not only considerable demographic change from large-scale migration after World War II, but for reimagining the nation in light of this, distancing itself from Australia's white colonial roots. Schools and multicultural education have been pivotal on this topic. While multicultural education was initially focused on policies attuned to a logic of incorporation, such as in equipping the children of migrants with English language skills, it now involves a much wider remit, including programs of intercultural understanding and community harmony with an orientation that is not merely inward-looking in terms of individual school communities, but has a broader perspective that considers such issues on a national and global scale. This broader remit is not always understood by schools, especially those with limited ethnic diversity or, as they are termed in Australia, low language background other than English (LBOTE), the main marker of migrant-derived diversity in Australian schools. For some, multicultural education is still more a matter for schools with a concentration of students with an LBOTE, despite mandated policies to the contrary. Yet promoting civility is not straightforward. If it does little more than provide a gloss of acceptance of ethnic, racial, and cultural difference predicated on essentialized and stereotypical ideas of ethnic difference, such forms of unreflective civility can mask issues of racism and discrimination.

These may not be perceived as problems within schools but are certainly prevalent within the broader community and are the responsibility of schools and curricula to address. The celebration of Harmony Day is one example. Introduced by the conservative government of Prime Minister John Howard in 1999 on the United Nations International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, it operates in Australian schools more as a bland celebration of the nation's diversity and the acceptance of others. Schools encourage students to wear orange to mark the occasion rather than to use it as an opportunity to draw attention to racism and how best to combat it. Such diluted messages filter through to schools in policies such as Western Australia's Shaping the Future Multicultural Plan, which has a single reference to racism while foregrounding celebration in the form of multicultural events in its policy priority of "harmonious and inclusive communities."[57]

Together with these differing logics of incorporation, recognition, and civility, multicultural education, as with educational and social policy broadly, has been influenced by neoliberal forms of governance. As a result, the quest for equity, driven by an agenda of social justice, has been sidelined in favor of economic rationality. This is evident in the changes to programs of multicultural education in NSW over the last decade or so. NSW is Australia's oldest and largest state in terms of population and arguably the most culturally diverse. It has responsibility for

over 1.2 million school students (over 30 percent of the nations' 4.1 million students), of which 63 percent are in government schools.[58] In terms of students in its public schools, one in three has an LBOTE, one in four requires EAL/D support, and one in sixty-nine has a refugee background.[59] This diversity is not uniformly spread, with far greater concentrations of LBOTE students in urban centers. In Sydney, for example, some schools record numbers representing over 95 percent of their student population compared to others that are far less culturally and linguistically diverse with numbers below 10 percent. Multicultural education in the state is guided by two policies, one specifically focused on multicultural education and the other around anti-racism, both of which draw on the differing logics already discussed.

Policies, however, are not necessarily a good indication of practice, and their implementation varies in schools.[60] One key exception is NSW's anti-racism policy's requirement for schools to appoint "anti-racism contact officers," or ARCOs, from among their staff. Tasked with working with principals to address incidents of racism, these officers receive departmental training and guidance in their role. Such centrally mandated positions tend to result in a high degree of compliance, but this contrasts with the devolution of government responsibility in other areas of multicultural education. A decade of conservative state government from 2012 to 2023, and its embrace of neoliberalism, has seen a dismantling of long-established support structures around multicultural education. This is most evident in the loss of the EAL/D/multicultural education consultancy comprising specialized departmental staff providing guidance, support, and professional learning to schools across the state. Instead, through a devolved funding model termed "Local Schools, Local Decisions," representative of a broader adoption of public sector neoliberal reform, schools were ostensibly given greater autonomy over their own finances, staffing, and professional learning. What resulted was the loss of considerable corporate knowledge and expertise around EAL/D pedagogy and multicultural education and a rudderless approach to policy implementation.[61]

The misguided nature of relinquishing much of this centralized support became evident in 2015 when the national government increased its intake of refugees from Syria and Iraq. The NSW government rapidly appointed temporary consultants to support the government response, filling the void, if only short-term, left by the demise of the EAL/D/multicultural education consultancy, which in the past had supported refugees and their families. This responsibility has now largely fallen to schools. To some extent, the failure of Local Schools, Local Decisions has been acknowledged through a new funding model and some reinstatement of centralized support, hastened by a change of state government in 2023. But the policy's residual effects are still being felt, especially in terms of EAL/D support in schools. With principals still retaining considerable control over who fills their allocation of EAL/D positions, many who take up this employment (much of which

is on a fractional basis) lack the required expertise; convenience and budgetary constraints take precedence over quality teaching and specialized support.[62]

Coupled with years of inadequate funding and surging numbers of students requiring support, the state of EAL/D provision in NSW schools is indeed dire, a form of neglect the state's teachers' union has termed "tantamount to institutional racism."[63] This situation is exacerbated by escalating industrial issues of teacher pay and staffing shortages affecting teacher retention and the quality of public education because many students, not only EAL/D learners, are taught by those without the required subject expertise.[64] This is a greater issue in schools that are difficult to staff and that have student populations that are both high LBOTE and low socioeconomic status, thereby affecting those of greatest need and jeopardizing goals of educational equity.

To maintain practitioner quality in the state, teachers across both public and private systems must adhere to professional standards determined by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, administered within the state by the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA). The standard around professional knowledge most relevant to multicultural education requires teachers entering the profession to "Demonstrate knowledge of teaching strategies that are responsive to the learning strengths and needs of students from diverse linguistic, cultural, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds," with a focus on mentoring and leadership as teachers progress in their career. While this is ostensibly an improvement, there is no unpacking of what this professional knowledge involves, the details of which are left to initial teacher education and in-service professional learning, with much of the latter regulated by NESA. To remain accredited, teachers in NSW are required to undertake one hundred hours of professional learning every five years, but the nature of this professional learning is often critiqued as being instrumental, geared toward meeting departmental targets around topics like literacy and numeracy.[65] Such measures designed to improve teachers' professional practice now operate more as a mechanism of accountability, curbing practitioner autonomy and raising questions as to what constitutes teacher professional knowledge. Similar measures are also afoot within initial teacher education, with the national government now prescribing core curriculum for all preparatory teaching degree programs, with content around "the brain and learning" sitting alongside what is termed "responsive teaching" for various equity groups. There seems to be little appreciation, however, of the disciplinary disjuncture between what is proposed and what is offered. The documents indicate a bias toward the universalizing approach of cognitive psychology and cursory treatment of the cultural specificity of a more sociologically informed perspective.[66]

This policy shift entails too many issues to consider in this essay, though the questions it raises are important, especially about knowledge that pertains to

multicultural education (and for Indigenous education). Requiring teachers to be "culturally responsive" seems a positive move, but without an accompanying critical interrogation of what is meant by "culture," it seems doomed to simply reproduce the essentialist assumptions associated with the reductive forms of cultural recognition already discussed. These concerns have long been voiced by international education scholars such as Courtney Cazden and Ellen Leggett, who proposed such an approach in the 1970s, and Gloria Ladson-Billings, in response to applications of culturally relevant pedagogy.[67] More recent variants such as educational scholar Django Paris's culturally sustaining pedagogy also seem susceptible to such troubling interpretations.[68] As education scholar Mardi Schmeichel has written, "For educators concerned with promoting equity, it is taken for granted that culturally relevant teaching is 'good' teaching."[69] This is similarly the view within the Australian context, no doubt prompting policymakers to adopt the approach as core curriculum in the initial training of teachers.[70] Even in a recent report titled *Toward an Australian Culturally Responsive Pedagogy*, which raises concerns about the potential superficiality of the approach, its tendencies toward cultural essentialism, and difficulties in accounting for the impact of superdiversity, it is still endorsed as fundamentally good pedagogy.[71]

Teachers require a set of conceptual resources in their professional toolkit to assist them to critically examine issues of culture, ethnicity, and race, attentive to the impact of globalization and hybridizing forms of identification – central to the task of a *critical* multicultural education. Programs that involve teachers in the development of such critical perspectives and a language to explore these complexities have proved successful in moving teachers away from a "pragmatic" mode of teacher professionalism toward a more reflexive approach to the task of teaching that brings intellectual complexity to their classroom practice.[72] Of course, any approach a teacher adopts is reliant upon the knowledge they possess. In a world of constant change and cultural flux, this entails a certain intellectual agility informed by a broad sociological understanding. Without this, practitioners make assumptions about "good teaching" rather than assessing the suitability of an approach for their own particular contexts.

This overview of issues around multicultural education has suggested that the pursuit of educational equity in Australia's schooling systems is faced with several challenges. Together with reconciling what are often competing logics of multiculturalism – incorporation, recognition, and civility – there is a need to counter the insidious impact of neoliberalism that erodes the social and educational infrastructures so essential in making sure all students have access to quality education, free of forms of discrimination at various levels that can impede their progress. Quality education is also dependent on quality teaching; practitioners must be appropriately prepared for the complexities of contemporary schooling. As education scholars Ninetta Santoro and Aileen Kennedy explain, there is

now a "professional imperative" for teachers to acquire the requisite knowledge and skills "to better respond to cultural and linguistic diversity."[73] This response, however, must avoid the reductive essentialism that often characterizes practices of multicultural education in schools. Rather, a transformative multicultural education is needed, with teachers and students attuned to the cultural complexities of a globalizing world, effectively navigating the difficult terrain of this rapid diversification.[74]

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ENDNOTES

1. Julianne Schultz, *The Idea of Australia: A Search for the Soul of the Nation* (Allen and Unwin, 2022).
2. Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, "Foreword," in *Multicultural Australia: United, Strong, Successful* (Australian Government, 2017), 3.
3. These include programs related to socioeconomic disadvantage, gender, Indigeneity, rurality, and, more recently, sexuality and disability.
4. We characterize diversity in terms of "ethnicity." All terms are problematic, but we wish to avoid essentializing ideas of race and culture. See Megan Watkins and Greg Noble, *Doing Diversity Differently in a Culturally Complex World: Critical Perspectives on Multicultural Education* (Bloomsbury, 2021), 54–66.
5. Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Cultural Diversity of Australia* (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022), https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/cultural-diversity-australia.

[6] James Jupp, *From White Australia to Woomera: The Story of Australian Immigration* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[7] Fazal Rizvi, *Encountering Education in the Global* (Routledge, 2014).

[8] Jupp, "From Assimilation to a Multicultural Society, 1972–2006," in *From White Australia to Woomera*.

[9] Rod Allan and Bob Hill, "Multicultural Education in Australia: Historical Development and Current Status," in *The Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education*, ed. James Banks (Macmillan, 1995), 763–777.

[10] Chris Inglis, "Multicultural Education in Australia: Two Generations of Evolution," in *The Routledge International Companion to Multicultural Education*, ed. James Banks (Routledge, 2009), 109–120.

[11] Tim Soutphommasane, "The Realities and Rhetoric of Multiculturalism," The Australian Human Rights Commission, October 1, 2013.

[12] James O'Donnell, "Mapping Social Cohesion: The 2022 Scanlon Foundation Surveys," in *Monash Institute for the Study of Global Movements* 2022 (Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, 2022).

[13] Watkins and Noble, *Doing Diversity Differently in a Culturally Complex World*, 20–21. These logics loosely mirror different understandings of "equity"–redistribution of resources, recognition, participation, and representation–as outlined in Rob Gilbert, Amanda Keddie, Bob Lingard, et al., "Equity and Education Research, Policy and Practice: A Review," in *Equity and Education: Exploring New Directions for Equity in Australian Education*, ed. Alan Reid and Louise Reynolds (Australian College of Educators, 2013), 16–51.

[14] Ghassan Hage, *Against Paranoid Nationalism* (Pluto Press, 2003), 111; and Ien Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living between Asia and the West* (Routledge, 2001).

[15] For different discussions of this relation, see Elizabeth Povinelli, *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism* (Duke University Press, 2002); and Alanna Kamp, Kevin Dunn, Yin Paradies, and Katie Blair, "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People's Attitudes Towards Australian Multiculturalism, Cultural Diversity, 'Race' and Racism, 2015–16," *Australian Aboriginal Studies* (2) (2018): 50–70. At a practical level, there is much overlap and dissimilarity in multicultural and Indigenous education policies, but that is beyond the focus of this essay.

[16] Kay Anderson and Affrica Taylor, "Exclusionary Politics and the Question of National Belonging: Australian Ethnicities in 'Multiscalar' Focus," *Ethnicities* 5 (4) (2005): 460–485. The terms *Aboriginal*, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander*, and *Indigenous* are often used interchangeably, alongside newer terms such as *First Peoples* or *First Nations*. All terms are, however, contested and used inconsistently in academic and popular domains. See Neroli Colvin, *Rurality, Diversity and Schooling: Multiculturalism in Regional Australia* (Bloomsbury, 2024).

[17] Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians* (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022).

[18] Elizabeth Fells, "The Proliferation of Identity Politics in Australia: An Analysis of Ministerial Portfolios, 1970–2000," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 38 (1) (2003): 101–117.

[19] Kirstie Wellauer, Carly Williams, and Bridget Brennan, "Why the Voice Failed," ABC News, October 14, 2023, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-10-16/why-the-voice-failed/102978962.

[20] Jon Altman and Tim Rowse, "Indigenous Affairs," in *Ideas and Influence: Social Science and Public Policy in Australia*, ed. Peter Saunders and James Walter (University of New South Wales, 2005), 159–177.

[21] Ulf Hannerz, *Cultural Complexity: Studies in the Social Organization of Meaning* (Columbia University Press, 1992).

[22] Steve Vertovec, "Toward Post-Multiculturalism? Changing Communities, Conditions and Contexts of Diversity," *International Social Science Journal* 61 (199) (2010): 83–95. For a discussion of essentialism, diversity, and Indigenous Australia, see Yin Paradies "Beyond Black and White: Essentialism, Hybridity and Indigeneity," *Journal of Sociology* 42 (4) (2006): 355–367. Most Indigenous students, for example, live in urban contexts and have mixed ancestries, and sit alongside other students of mixed, diverse backgrounds.

[23] Stephen May and Lincoln Dam, "Essentialism," in *Encyclopedia of Critical Whiteness Studies in Education*, ed. Zachary Casey (Brill Sense, 2021), 179–187.

[24] Tim Heffernan, "The History of Education in Australia," in *The Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*, published online May 21, 2021, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.1459.

[25] Jenny Dean, Natalie Downes, and Phillip Roberts, "Access to and Equity in the Curriculum in the Australian Government Secondary School System," *SN Social Sciences* 3 (64) (2023), https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-023-00641-7.

[26] Gilbert, Keddie, Lingard, et al., "Equity and Education Research, Policy and Practice."

[27] Richard Teese, *From Opportunity to Outcomes: The Changing Role of Public Schooling in Australia and National Funding Arrangements* (Centre for Research on Education Systems, 2011).

[28] Christina Ho, *Ethnic Divides in Schooling Discussion Paper: A Class of Their Own Discussion Paper Series* (Centre for Policy Development, 2019), https://cpd.org.au/2019/05/ethnic-divides-schooling-discussion-paper-may-2019.

[29] Watkins and Noble, *Doing Diversity Differently in a Culturally Complex World*.

[30] Sue Thomson, "Australia: PISA Australia–Excellence and Equity?" in *Improving a Country's Education*, ed. Nuno Crato (Springer, 2021).

[31] Yekaterina Chzhen, Gwyther Rees, Anna Gromada, et al., *An Unfair Start: Inequality in Children's Education in Rich Countries. Innocenti Report Card 15* (UNICEF, 2018). See Chris Bonnor, Christina Ho, and Gary Richards, *A Creeping Indigenous Separation, Institutionalised Separation, Separating Scholars and Ethnic Divides in Schooling* (Centre for Policy Development, 2018); and Julie Hare, "Education Gap 'Ricochets Through Generations': Jacon Clare," *Australian Financial Review*, November 2, 2022, https://www.afr.com/work-and-careers/education/education-gap-ricochets-through-generations-jason-clare-20221102-p5buw8.

[32] *State* here refers to both states and territories.

[33] Craig Campbell and Helen Proctor, "Inventing Public School Systems: 1861–1900," in *A History of Australian Schooling* (Allen and Unwin, 2014), 64–105.

[34] Concurrent federalism contrasts with coordinate (Canada) and cooperative (U.S.) models. See Jack Keating and Malgorzata Klatt, "Australian Concurrent Federalism and Its Implications for the Gonski Review," *Journal of Education Policy* 28 (4) (2013): 411–426.

[35] Heffernan, "The History of Education in Australia."

[36] Campbell and Proctor, "Equality of Opportunity: 1951–1975," in *A History of Australian Schooling*, 178–210.

[37] Pat Thomson, "Making Education More Equitable," in *International Studies in Educational Inequality, Theory and Policy*, ed. Richard Teese, Stephen Lamb, Marie Duru-Bellat, and Sue Helme (Springer, 2007); and Mary Kalantzis, Bill Cope, Greg Noble, and Scott Poynting, "A Systems Perspective," *Cultures of Schooling: Pedagogies for Cultural Difference and Social Access* (Falmer Press, 1990, and Routledge, 2012), 15–39.

[38] See the timeline and summary of reforms in Gilbert, Keddie, Lingard, et al., "Equity and Education Research, Policy and Practice."

[39] Emily Ross, "Why Do Australian States Need a National Curriculum, and Do Teachers Even Use It?" The Conversation, November 19, 2021, https://theconversation.com/why-do-australian-states-need-a-national-curriculum-and-do-teachers-even-use-it-171745.

[40] Campbell and Proctor, *A History of Australian Schooling*, 199–200.

[41] Campbell and Proctor, "Towards a Market of Schools: 1976–2000," in *A History of Australian Schooling*, 211–247.

[42] Jane Kenway, "Challenging Inequality in Australian Schools: Gonski and Beyond," *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 34 (2) (2013): 286–308; and Heffernan, "The History of Education in Australia," 14.

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[44] Juan de Dios Oyarzún, Jessica Gerrard, and Glenn Savage, "Ethics in Neoliberalism? Parental Responsibility and Education Policy in Chile and Australia," *Journal of Sociology* 58 (3) (2023): 285–303.

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[46] Megan Watkins and Greg Noble, *Disposed to Learn: Schooling, Ethnicity and the Scholarly Habitus* (Bloomsbury, 2013).

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[63] Ibid.

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