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 na
tions in the world, but this has presented challenges for educational equity. The intro-
duction 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 inequal
ities 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 re
forms, 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 global
ized world.

Central to Australia's self-image is the idea that it is an egalitarian, demo
cratic, and inclusive society.[1] A core element of that self-image is the pop
ular claim that "Australia is the mos TJ ET EMC /P <</Lang (en-US)/MCID 9740

We then explore the responses to ethnic diversity in Australia, with a particular fo
cus on the state of New South Wales (NSW), both in terms of broader policies and

the history of the original inhabitants of the land–who have occupied the conti nent for sixty thousand years–positions them differently within Australian society. This is re ected in different, if parallel, institutional histories. Now numbering ap proximately one million, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders represent 3.8 per cent 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, pol icies targeting Indigenous inhabitants were de ned 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 Aus tralian population, giving the national government (rather than state governments) the major power to make laws regarding Indigenous Australians, an Of ce of Ab original Affairs was established. In 1972, under Whitlam, the of ce was extended into a government department. The 1970s were, as with multiculturalism, the de cade when policies of assimilation gave way to an emphasis on recognition and cul tural 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 Constitu tion an Aboriginal Voice to Parliament are hotly debated, but it re ects at least a lack of agreement over the means to address Indigenous marginalization in Australia.[19] Despite the many differences–and the speci city of the experiences of Aboriginal Australians–Indigenous-affairs and multicultural policies share a degree of poli cy 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 rst implies an emphasis on inte gration 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 cultur al complexity that has resulted from the dynamics of globalization, reshaping in stitutions, relations, and practices.[21] A consequence of this complexity is that Australia is increasingly de ned by the phenomenon of superdiversity, which re fers not simply to the diversi cation of sizable ethnoracial populations, but to the dynamic interplay of social factors, such as mixed marriage and cultural inter-mixing. These processes affect long-time, migrant, and Indigenous Australians alike and challenge the common assumptions about the homogenized nature of ethni cally or racially de ned communities.[22] These domains are both prone to forms of essentialism that don't correspond to the realities of social life and therefore pose signi cant 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, 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.

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 (mad an 9 (sc 428.32a3DC BT 0.04 Tw 11 0 0 11 72 335.7 Tm [(i7 >>E

es enshrined public funding for private schools, often at the expense of public schools and disadvantaged students[42] As a consequence, the proportion of stu dents attending government schools has declined signi cantly since the 1970s, in

verse backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, those in 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 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

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 unreective 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 lter 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 in uenced 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

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 ed ucation is needed, with teachers and students attuned to the cultural complexi ties of a globalizing world, effectively navigating the dif cult terrain of this rapid diversi cation.[74]

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about the authors

_____ is Professor at the Institute for Culture and Society at Western Syd ney University, Australia. He has been involved in research in multicultural educa tion for almost forty years, with wider interests in relations between youth, ethnic ity, and gender; migration and intercultural relations; and Bourdieusian analysis. He has published eleven books, including *Doing Diversity Differently in a Culturally Com plex World: Critical Perspectives on Multicultural Education* (with Megan Watkins, 2021) and *Disposed to Learn: Schooling, Ethnicity and the Scholarly Habitus* (with Megan Wat kins, 2013).

_____ is Adjunct Professor in the School of Education and Fellow of the Institute for Culture and Society at Western Sydney University, Australia. She has extensive experience as a teacher educator in multicultural education, with broad er interests related to issues of pedagogy, affect, and embodiment. She is the au thor of *Doing Diversity Differently in a Culturally Complex World: Critical Perspectives on Mul ticultural Education* (with Greg Noble, 2021), *Disposed to Learn: Schooling, Ethnicity and the Scholarly Habitus* (with Greg Noble, 2013), and *Discipline and Learn: Bodies, Pedagogy and Writing* (2011).

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