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Changing Communities

International Students in Local Government Schools

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Abstract

Although fewer than 10% of international students are in the primary and secondary educational sectors, recent figures show the number of these students to have increased exponentially making Australia a leading player in school education provision along with Britain and the United States. The impact of these changes on local schools and the correspondent negotiation of globalising trends on secondary schools alter the ways that identity and difference are understood and played out and the ways that policy and practice in participating schools can be understood. At the same time the terms and conditions that define these demands – particularly as they characterize them as marketable commodities, English language and as global and western education – need to be spelled out and interrogated. In this paper I interrogate the ways that community members within local government schools speak about the impact of fee-paying international students on their school. I suggest that these discussions are defined by the material and conceptual relations of identity and difference crisscrossed by the politics of consumption and production.

Keywords: Identity and difference, Commodification, International students, Secondary schools, Globalisation

Over the last two decades the number of international students in Australian institutions has increased rapidly, becoming the third largest service export after tourism and transportation and generating $4 billion to the economy.[1] Although just under 10% of students in 2000, recent figures show the number of students in primary and secondary schools to have increased exponentially making Australia a leading player in school education provision along with Britain and the United States. Over the last decade, local government schools have been allowed to take in fee-paying international students and to compete with schools private schools in the international education market. This has meant that public schools – dependent almost solely on government funding, and local community participation and support – can source funding and cliental outside of Australia. My research examines the impact of these changes on what have been local and community schools.

The discussion focus is a pilot study undertaken in 2003, which investigates the impact of international student provision in five Victorian state secondary schools, two within metropolitan Melbourne, one in a nearby regional centre and two in a rural centre four hundred kilometres distant. Following from the naturalistic research methods suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1999), Strauss and Corbne (1998) the project consisted of hour-long focused interviews with school representatives (in all cases the Vice Principal). The study importantly describes the business of international students programs: their marketing, service provision, success and impact on the school community. These discussions are the subject of reports and other papers still being completed. In this paper, I interrogate the ways that community representatives within these schools speak about the impact of the international student on community relations within the school.

Recent writings examine the confused and ambivalent manner in which community belonging and community relationships are understood in contemporary western societies and in Australia.[2] The paradoxical notion that underpins liberal multiculturalism is that all people are the same, even as groups belong differently within communities. This notion has become increasingly complex, as the modern definitions of identity that define people and groups as primordially and essentially different appear increasingly complex and post-modern – a ‘moveable feast’ whereby difference appears to disappear.[3] What has been frightening in recent times is the realisation that these differences have not disappeared but remain tied (sutured) to other and normalised notions that define ways how people belong and do not belong within communities.[4] The different ways that this paradox has been played out over a decade in one Melbourne school is a case-in-point.[5] In question here is the different ways that the terms and conditions of these representations have been defined and talked about in relation to the presence of international students in local government secondary schools.

In this paper, I examine the different ways that relationships between ‘the school community’ and ‘the international student’ were spoken about within a pilot study of a metropolitan, rural and regional school. Even accounting for the small size of the study, and the need for further research, international students were understood in paradoxical and...
ambivalent ways crisscrossed by discourses of commodification and identity and difference. Following admonitions from recent race theory, I explore these stories from three different vantage points. From the first two of these vantage points I describe these conversations and explore the debates that provide their focus. From the third vantage point, I trace the normalised logics that define the relationship ‘the internationalise student’/‘the school community’, to describe but then to transcend the binaries contained within them. I make my argument in four parts. The first section, ‘Three local schools’, describes three of schools participant within the study (one metropolitan, one regional and one rural) and examines their participation within the international students program.[6] The second, ‘Describing community relations’ describes ways that relationships between community members can be researched and interrogated. The third ‘the international student’ describes the different ways those relations were understood and spoken about. The final section ‘International students in local schools explores the normative context negotiated within relationships between local school communities and international students and considers their importance for future research about international students in educational institutions.

Three Local Schools

Kilnoon Secondary College

The 1980’s buildings of Kilnoon Secondary College house a population of 520 students. Sited in the Southeastern suburbs of Melbourne, the school stands apart from the heavy traffic and the light industry that impact on nearby neighbourhoods. Instead suburban brick residences, surrounded by small but well-kept gardens, so typical within the Melbourne metropolitan area, surround the school.

The school has a largely cosmopolitan population of first and second-generation migrant students originating from: South East Asia (particularly Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand), Africa, Europe and South America. Willis, the school Vice Principal, tells me that ‘Aussie Students’ make up 50% of the school. However, many of these Australian students are born to Asian parents: fifteen twenty percent being of Cambodian and 15–20% of Vietnamese origin.

It is a big mixture. It is 50% Aussie. Although if you went into our classroom you’d probably would say yes, right where are they. Can you spot them. Because they don’t look Aussie. But of course they’ve changed their names. They wear Aussie. They eat Aussie. They watch Aussie. And they speak English perfectly. So its just their appearance means...as you say, second generation. - kil p.17

Defining the school population in this metropolitan government school is somewhat complex; as notions of ‘who is Australian’ no longer seem straight forward. The school is 50% Australian when you describe the number of students who have lived in Australia all of their lives and have assumed traditional ‘Aussie’ cultural characteristics. Nevertheless, the students do not look the way Australians are understood to look, and this continues to mark them out as second generation Australian. Even as 50% of the school population can be described as Australian and as being part of the general community, in a sleight of hand that so often underpins descriptions of Australian multiculturalism, some people are described differently as Australian than others. [7] Added to this differentiation, is the cosmopolitanism of a large newly arrived immigrant population.

When I approach the school they have 18 international students (four of them completing year 12). The students come mostly from Vietnam and Cambodia with other coming from Japan, China and Taiwan.

Chadwick Secondary School

Chadwick Secondary College sits on the western side of a large regional city to Melbourne’s West. The school seems enormous; a long row of 60’s style concrete, prefab buildings are intermingled with well-used portables and much newer administration and library facilities. The school houses 1,100 students and includes eight classes at each of the year levels 7 – 12. The school is organised on well-established traditional lines including a well-integrated house system that cuts across the horizontal divisions of the year level system. Recently, the school has changed:

That has been like that since the school was established in 55’ and it has been Scarred. So it’s a very Anglo Saxon population but changing as the shift of second generation migrants from Geelong are moving to the newer areas where finding that certainly the Smiths and Jones are being replaced by other names that are certainly overseas populations.

That is certainly...their not necessarily going to be speaking another language though. Within that though we have about 100 students of international origin themselves who may or may not qualify for ESL support.

The school population is essentially ‘Anglo Australian’ but this is changing as the second generation of migrants who worked the industries of Northern Margenton shift to more affluent suburbs to the cities west. ‘The Smiths and Jones are being replaced by other names that are certainly overseas populations’, Miller tells me (Chad, p.4). What seemed to be a homogenous and ‘Anglo-Australian’ population also includes 100 students of NESB background, representing nearly 40 – 50 different countries. Unlike migrants attending schools to the
north of the city these are children of professional families who work at the university, research and engineering facilities housed nearby. As recently arrived migrants, many of these students should have qualified for English as a Second Language (ESL) funding and support. However neither the families nor the school had clarified this as a priority and such language support has only recently been acknowledged and budgeted for.

The school has twelve international students: Six from China, Japan, Indonesia and Malaysia and another six arriving from Indonesia, Germany, China and Japan.

Corrumba College

Corrumba College sits high on a hill overlooking the residential areas of the rural city. Just out of sight, is the rugged coastline of Victoria's south-coast. The old yellow-brick buildings sprawl amongst outlying paddocks and the rich pastures of Victoria's dairy and enroaching sheep and wheat belt. The concrete stone design of the school's grandiose administration tower over an immense bus park where fourteen hundred and fifty students are bussed daily to the school from the city and the surrounding countryside. The high school is considered as a highly academic school, with results that include it alongside the top academic schools within Victoria. Its students go on to study at Melbourne, Monash, Queensland as well as Deakin Universities. Teachers at the school are excited about the impact of international students because of it introduces a different and more cosmopolitan aspect to the school community and its students in that:

our kids because their isolated from any kind of ethnic traditions there aren't ... its pretty monocultural here - corr. p2/3.

The school is described by the Vice Principal as 'monocultural'. I realise as I look back through my notes that I have not examined what such a definition might mean. I note that it is set against, 'isolated from', other and different groups of people who have 'ethnic traditions that aren't...'.

The School has 18 International Students, Mostly from Japan

Speaking about Community Relations

The presence of the international student within the Australian local school communities is only sketchily discussed in the literature. Sparse research into the secondary school sector (Edwards and Tudball, 2000; DE&T, 2000) hints at the dramatic implications these changes have had for secondary school communities. Demands for appropriate English provision, academic curriculum, cultural inclusive pedagogy and pastoral care for local and international students make new demands on the international students themselves and the local and

the local school community generally. Purdie and Neill's (1994) reminder is that teachers need to rethink their beliefs about learning in ways that take note of socio-cultural and historical differences even as they refuse the narrowness of the stereotype. Edwards and Tubball (2000) note that the response to internationalisation and to the international student needs to be a holistic one that takes into account ways to change the schools curriculum, charter and culture. It must negotiate these relations in ways that ensure 'the process of internationalisation is truly a 'Two-way street' in an inevitably globalised future'. (p.18).

Other writings, (Dooley, 2002), Matthews (2002), Singh (2001) Arber (2003, 2004)) suggest that these relations need to be understood more complexly. These debates take place within social cultural conditions and therefore within schools that are 'likely to be gendered, racialised and classed. Debates about pedagogy take place within other negotiated logics that define who gets access to what and under what circumstances. Their discussion takes place within the more general discussion of power control that defines and positions community members differently as pedagogic subjects. It is this relation between identities and their position within communities, which must be deconstructed.

Said's (1991) contribution is that these debates about identity and difference take place within an unequally empowered and post-colonial world in which the 'West' has the power to create its own reality. Dwyer (1997) defines this multi-positioned world as a 'white' world whereby narratives of white set out the conceptual and material terms and conditions that describe identities: the resources they can use and the places and spaces that can inhabit. Hage's (1998) input is that in Australia such belonging and not-belonging is defined by a particular kind of white - of not-wogginess. I have argued that these relations are played out in particular and complex ways where changed conceptions of 'who-we-are' and 'who-they-are' are negotiated within a changing but nevertheless conterminous sense of who belongs and who belongs differently. [8] These conceptions of community and belonging become increasingly complex as in recent times globalising trends (technology, communication, trade, the production of goods, and people and the mass movements of people) change ways that people understand day-to-day experience and domains of policy and practice, and taken-for-granted concepts, particularly identity. [9] It is this changed understanding of self-identity and difference and the terms and conditions under which this relation is negotiated, that is being discussed here.

I take here Stuart Hall's (1997) argument that descriptions of identity have also changed. The conception of the human person as essentially formed, fully centred, unified and reasonable is more
recently constructed as ‘post-modern’. It is a ‘moveable feast’ in which conceptions of who-we-are are in process and at odds with themselves. Conceptions are made and changed within the contingent and disjunctive vagaries of a changing and increasingly dangerous socio-historical context. Such definitions of identities – our own and those of others – are made at the point of suture between the discourses and practices which ‘interpellate’ or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses and the processes, which construct us as subjects that can be ‘spoken’. This position describes the social world as fraught by the inequalities that emerge from the negotiations between changing and multifarious discourses. It is a relation inscribed in the juncture between negotiations of meaning and practice related to a particular conceptual or practical domain and the ontological processes that frame them. The relation between those two processes - the identity as one defines it and the conditions, which mediate the identity that one-is-to-be - defines the terrain that needs to be clarified here. The study of intercultural relations explores the debates that define the ways that we speak about relationships between others and ourselves. These debates remain tied to the ontological conditions that define the ways that people are able to belong or not belong to these communities.

What is important is the multilayered complexity of these relations. Atvah Brah’s (1996) notion of ‘diasporic space’ is that these relationships are ones of concept but also ones of materiality played across patterned fields of power. Constructs such as class, gender and race and ways of talking about them as multiculturalism and racism are made as ‘a specific type of power relation’ produced and exercised in and through a myriad of economic, political and cultural practices. These come together in imagined spaces in which:

Individuals and collectivities are simultaneously positioned in social relations constituted and performed across multiple dimensions of differentiation: that these categories always operate in articulation. Multi-axiality foregrounds the intersectionality of economic, political and cultural facets of power. It highlights that power does not inhabit the realm of macro structures alone, but is thoroughly implicated in the everyday of lived experience. Multi-axiality draws attention to how power is exercised across global institutions ... On the other hand, it emphasises the flow of power within the inter- and intra-subjective space. That is, it is equally firmly tuned to the unexpected disruptions of psychic processes to the complacency of rationality. (Brah, 1996, p.242)

I am arguing that the actions of individuals and debates between social collectivities and normalised conception form a ‘multi-axiality’: an intersection between different facets of power. The notion of diasporic space is a conceptual and material ‘terrain of imagination’ that describes a never-reached, always-in-process construction of contingent and often-disjunctive ways of meaning and practice.[10] Its topography is not singular but consists of unequally empowered multifarious, disjointed, parallel, conflicting, incompatible and compound notions. Moreover, the power of imagined space does not remain as one of concept, but is profoundly material. Its logics and the notional and structural conditions it engenders, mediate the relation between day-to-day experiences and practices of individuals and their social world. It marks the different but always-possible location of ‘real’ positions and ‘real’ people.

The discussion of the international student and their relationship with the school needs to be reconsidered in ways that look at the day-to-day conversations that describe them. They also need to look beyond those conversations to explore the normative context that underpins those discussions and interrogates the ways that they position international students within the school. The next section reports on discussions about community relations from each of these three vantage points: that of individual concerns and practices, that of the debates that emerged in relation to those and that of the normalised conception that provides the context of the discussion.

The Impact of the International Student

Kilnoon College

Acceptance of the program. I haven’t had one teacher or anybody say ‘no’. we shouldn’t be doing this, this is wrong. It does bring considerable money into the school and that of course makes it very appealing to many people. And it easily pays for itself and in fact its not only that of course it provides facilities for other students in the school. Apart from the ESL and through the international students themselves. We provide whatever they need virtually. But apart from that there’s still money available for all students and that’s the advantage of having them. – kil – p.10

No-one, Vice Principal Robert Willis argues, at Kilnoon has complained about the introduction of international students into the school. The international program at Kilnoon, has been a considerably successful one in a business sense. ‘It pays for itself’ and ‘provides facilities for other students in the school’ This means thinking about ways that the school is organised for its students. It is also means calculating the money needed to look after international students, the money earned from teaching international student students and the ways that the profits from these ventures are used. The international student is already defined as outside of the community, part of a business arrangement whereby they must bring in more than what they
cost. It is a two-tiered unequally empowered relationship whereby 'we' provide everything 'they need' and they leave money 'available for all students'. The tension that exists between the concept of 'all students' and 'of having them' spells out the confused but definitive binaries created within this relationship. On the one hand, the international student is included as part of the community of all students. On the other, they are always outsiders whose presence is only welcome as long as they are profitable for the other and more local participants within the community who choose to invite them.

This logic negotiates a second discourse. Willis' confused definition of the school community as consisting of students who are both Australian and who are 'not quite' Australian was noted in an earlier section of this paper. Here:

Generally our student population at Kilnoon we have about 520 students overall and they're from many different nationalities. It's mostly a South East Asian community. Cambodian, Vietnamese, Thai's - that sort of area. So having international student is not a cultural shock to the other students because they are use to seeing a range of students from varying countries around the world. Mention Africa, Europe and South America and so on.

So we are an international school as such but of course over the last few years we have taken on form 3 panes of international students and currently we have 18. But 4 of them are completing their year 12s and they will be moving on to other tertiary studies I guess. - kil 1

Willis explains that the international student is well accepted within the school community as Kilnoon secondary school is already a cosmopolitan school. The 'culture shock' he believes would usually underpin such difference is ameliorated only because the school already has 'a range of students'; from varying countries. Students and teachers are well used to seeing students from 'many different nationalities'. The difference that students from these countries would usually represent does not cause problems because many students at the school are already different from an unspoken norm of people and cultures within the school. Thus, even as he Willis argues that all the students are the same and accepted in their difference, he shares an awareness that students from some countries and cultures are different and perhaps difficult in particular ways.

The 'already-difference' whereby Willis sees his students as culturally different, even as they are the same in their difference underpins a third layer of tension. Willis is concerned that:

we don't want them to be so special that they won't even be accepted by the other students an so on. So we keep their names and presence down to what we think is acceptable levels. (kil p.5)

International students are understood to be 'elite' students. Their special status is both a reflection of their status as fee-paying students and of the extra demands such clients can make. It can also be a reflection of the different academic preparation, aspiration and achievement that is underpin their presence in the school. Willis is unsure whether or not to advertise the presence of international students because their achievement adds to the status of the school. He is concerned that such advertising might make students so special that they are not accepted by others. He wants teachers and community members to know who these students are so that their can provide appropriate support. At the same time he wants to keep the identities of these students anonymous so that they should not become the subject of adulation or envy. The discourses of class that underpin the placement of moneyed and academically aspirant students into what is otherwise a lower-middle class local school community needs to be the subject for further research. Placed on top of the ambivalent logic of cosmopolitan multiculturism, and commodification, through which Willis defines school thinking, the international student remains another and different presence.

Willis explains that the international student is not a problem, because the school is already cosmopolitan. This knowledge is nevertheless confused. Even as Willis acknowledges that all students are the same in their difference he is concerned that some students are part of the community differently. The racialised context of this differentiation is crisscrossed, by other and ambivalent discourses. The internationals student is wanted - as the bringer of much needed funding, and admired - as someone elite; even as he or she is someone who needs to be kept in place, pay for oneself and kept at 'acceptable levels'.

Chadwick Secondary College

The ambivalent relation between the international student and the school community is traced differently as the study shifts to the semi cosmopolitanism of a nearby regional centre. Karen Miller, Vice Principal of Chadwick Secondary school, argues that international students add value to the school in that:

We see it though as complimenting and certainly giving a international flavour to the school and certainly our students will benefit from this as well from overseas students. It's a difference of a reason for existing in that sense- chad p.21
Karen Miller explains that exchange activities at the school provide the basis for a healthy respect for travel and a appreciation of other cultures by the school community. The ‘international flavour’ of these activities provide, are in addition to the benefits brought to the school by international students. The measurable benefits that provided by the ‘difference’ of the international student is not unproblematic. What is important is that ‘our students’ behave properly, and ‘think about all the benefits here’.

We’ve always had a number of students who have gone overseas on exchange programs so there’s certainly a healthy respect for travelling and appreciation of other cultures. But the example now of students coming in who had very poor English skills is one that’s going to test our tolerance and respect in terms of what we expect our students to behave towards and that’s a challenge for us is to really...to continue to promote the program and its strengths and to encourage our students to think about all the benefits here.- chad p.

Unlike with Willis at the metropolitan Kilnloan secondary school, difference is not considered already-present. Instead difference is something exotic that the international student has. It is something that is useful for the local community of students, something that they no longer have to travel to obtain. At the same time difference is problematic, a ‘challenge’. Miller’s concern is that difference might become too difficult to accommodate within the normal bounds of tolerance and respect. A dualistic relation between the school community and the international student is developed. The matter is how ‘our students’ should react to the difference brought into the school as part of ‘the program’. The ‘healthy respect’ and appreciation of difference that students are able to obtain through the more traditional conditions of travel and exchange programs have been sorely tested when the international student comes to the school. Students with poor English skills test the attributes of ‘tolerance’ and ‘respect’ usually present within the school. They provide a test- a challenge for us. The discussion is of a community, a ‘we’ who has dabbled in difference and would encourage students ‘our’ students who belong within the community to continue to understand these differences. Difficulties emerge when these points of difference become too great.

These ambivalent notions of exotic and troublesome difference contradict others, which suggest that everyone is the same underneath and difference is something that can be easily overcome. The school has been lucky in that the international students at the school have been ‘good’ and ‘gregarious’ and have fitted in well. Local students who ‘have been really quite delighted’ to make friends with these exceptional students. Nevertheless, the awareness that ‘they’ and ‘we’ are not quite the same does not disappear. The potential exclusions that can emerge from these differentiations are positioned with the few stories of ‘harassment’ that emerge despite the usually good relations that develop between students...

Generally, they’ve been...we’ve been very lucky with students that we’ve had. They’ve been very good, gregarious students who fit in very well and therefore their friendship circles have increased and the students have been really quite delighted with being able to make friends with the students coming in and so for us the spin off has been very positive. There’s only been one or two examples and we’ve not been able to validate whether that’s been true or not. I mean examples that we’ve been aware of, it might have been a little bit of harassment but we’ve not been sure how correct that’s been.

Miller explains that relationships between local and international students have generally been good, and that ‘the spin off has been very positive. Nevertheless, a differentiation remains between ‘the students’ at the school and the students ‘we’ve had’, and who must ‘fit in’. For the most part there has been little trouble because of the adaptability of the international students themselves. There has however been ‘a little bit of harassment’. The difficulty of knowing whether these stories are ‘correct’ broaches the finding so often discussed in the literature that racist exclusion and harassment is so often a contested notion.[11] It is difficult to know who and in what ways students are excluded from the school community. What needs to be explored is the interrelation between individual experiences and practices of belonging and the ways that people can belong and not-belong within the school community.

The ambivalent ways that belonging and not-belonging is inscribed as cultural difference is criss-crossed with the business relationships that position international students. The international student/the local community binary - is clearly defined by the terms and conditions of commodification as well as by race. Miller, for instance, expresses her concern that the program has gone over budget and that the international students are costing rather than bringing in money. She argues that:

We’ve put on all year but the powers that be are still a little like ooooh well if we don’t get these students we can’t pay for it. Now I’ve done my budget and said we can pay for her, and we will have her on board but I’ve got to put the work in to be able to say well marketing quite fit. Otherwise yes we have the money coming in. So it’s a vicious circle= chad p.23.

The international student is someone who brings in money (and who needs to be marketed to) but is also someone who costs the community money. Their already raced presence within the community becomes increasingly complex as their acceptance depends on the outcome of ‘a vicious circle’
dependent on whether ‘the money is coming in’. Without such an injection of funding the international the student becomes unwanted as ‘we can’t pay for it’.

**Corrumba Secondary College**

At Corrumba Secondary College Lester Finch describes the ‘international student’ as ‘a good fund raiser’ for the school. At the same time the presence of international students will be good for ‘our kids’ as the ‘ethnic traditions’ that come with the arrival of the international student provide a useful way to break down the schools mono-cultural nature.

One is it’s a good fund raiser...But also its good for our kids because their isolated from any kind of ethnic traditions there aren’t we...its pretty monocultural here - corr. p2/3.

Once again, perceptions of the international student are crisscrossed by ambivalent conceptions of identity, difference and commodification. For Finch, the ethnic difference brought by the international student breaks down the isolation of the school and the more multicultural world represented outside of their community. Ethnic traditions, the thing that many have in the city and that international students bring from other countries, are seen as interesting and perhaps useful notions for the local students at the school to learn about. The exotic difference brought by the international and ethnic student is placed in binary opposition to an undefined and normalised conception - an almost-empty notion monoculturalism.

The exciting prospect of such difference is at the same time hugely problematic - ‘a big ask for the Australian students’

but we need to get some kids to buddy up with them when they first arrive and that’s a big ask for Australian kids to spend their...meet them before school if that’s what’s necessary and sit with them and explain things and you can’t...you can’t ask a kid to do that for very long because the novelty wears off initially. And then its hard at lunch time to be always trying to include this one in. Explain jokes 3 times and you know, all that sort of thing. It’s a big ask for the Australian students I think. The kids are happy to help out and they’ve got good friends. They go to each others parties and they go to weekends and things. Corr.17

The ethnically different international student is placed outside of the school community of Australian students. It has been difficult to alleviate these differences. The ‘kids are happy to help out’ and ‘they have got good friends’ going to ‘each others parties’ and going away on weekends. Nevertheless, attempts to get some ‘Australian kids’ to ‘buddy up’ with the international students have not worked well. It is a ‘big ask’ as ‘the novelty wears off’, to always be inclusive and to ‘explain jokes three times’. Teachers have also found things difficult. There is ‘a degree of staff anxiety about these students. In particular, teachers are worried about having non-English speaking students in their classrooms who need to sit for ‘rated’ exams. and certainly I think there’s a degree of staff anxiety about having these kids you know its hard to have a non English speaker in your classroom particularly if their doing an exam that’s going to be rated. Corr p.17-18

The differences brought by international students are difficult to cater for and the cause of a great deal of anxiety. Moreover international students can be frightening – dangerous even.

I know they all flock together initially and they’ll speak Japanese which you want them to anyway. They need that ... But there is that bit of a danger when...We don’t really want anymore than that from one country because they do stick too much together and they don’t mix enough. Its dangerous. – corr. p.4 –

The international student remains as a separate respected’ and ‘tolerated’ their difference is a and worrying presence within the school. No longer merely someone-physical, as well as notional presence. Students who ‘come from one country, ‘stick. too much together’, and ‘don’t mix enough’. The international student, now almost animalist in his or her difference, continues to ‘flock together’. Their presence is someway out of control, something that ‘we don’t want anymore’ if they ‘stick too much together’. The international student, with all their dangerous and separate difference, is something that we no longer want in our community if ‘they don’t mix enough’.

The discrete and inviolate difference of the international student is manifested in the smallness of the ESL room where the availability of computers encouraged students, particularly boys, to be separate and inside.

A bit of a girl/boy thing to. The boys seem to be worse in sticking together, and just talking amongst themselves. We have a room for them, the ESL room. It’s a tiny room and there’s computers there and they can actually go there and do their emailing and that sort of thing and we’ve now had to sort of kick them out because they just go there all the time and they don’t sit outside at all. ... its when they feel safe I suppose and its lunch time recess issues so in classes they have to because their all together in classes so they have to mix with others. And I believe they do but they just all flock to that comfort zone I guess. corr pp4-5

Even as Finch sympathetically describes the ESL room as an island, a place of safety for the international student, he is concerned that it represents a danger to the school community. ‘They’, the international student, remain apart from the school community. However, ‘they have to mix’. Even as ‘we’ve’ have the power ‘to kick them out’ and to make them ‘mix with other’, their
congregation within the computer room is a sympathetic but worrying presence.

Once again the good student is the one who has been successfully integrated into the school. The student who is ‘happy and chatty, plays soccer at lunchtimes and joins bike riding expeditions:

not been here very long and apparently they’ve been in Melbourne a year. I’ve just heard the other day that the father just decided their going to come to Warrnambool and they came the next day. So the boys weren’t particularly happy about coming here and they’ve come at the end of the year and ones in year 9, he’s on the bike trip now. He went to Apollo Bay and he’s father...

Denis: ...they mix in with the other kids...

Maureen: There’s one in year 9 and one in year 8, the year 8 one in particular is quite happy and chatty...

Denis: ...he plays at lunchtimes...

Maureen: Yeah. Where as the older one he’s much more reserved person just by nature. He’s gone on this bike ride with 20 kids or something.

Denis: And the boys have got him in and he plays soccer or whatever at lunch time with the boys.

corr – p.19

The desired student is the one who overcomes the barriers that define his difference, joins in the recreational activities of the school; mixes ‘in with the other kids’ and does ‘whatever’ with the boys at lunchtime. Nevertheless, the boy who is s happy has not been altogether successful in his integration into the school. His low study score is ‘an issue’ not only for the student but ‘impacts on the ‘overall results’ of the community as a whole.

And the other issue to is the exam results do impact on our overall results. We have really good results here ... This boy for example who had a fabulous time, he was lucky to get a study score of 20 in anything so individual teachers feel responsible for that and that’s an issue.

corr - 18[12]

At Corrumba Secondary school, the international student is wanted because of the funding he or she brings to the school and because he or she brings the difference of ‘ethnic traditions’ to the school. These differences can be overcome by being ‘happy and chatty’ and mixing easily with the other children. However, such melding between difference and the community seems to hide real boundaries between international students and the school community. The ‘bad’ student sitting separate in the island of the ESL room and the ‘good’ student who has failed all of his subjects, exemplifies this.

International Students in Local Government Schools

In an important chapter, Racism, reorientation and the cultural politics of Asia-Australian relations’.

Fazal Rizvi (1996, p;178), explores the contradictory and ambivalent logics that underpin the ways that Australians understand their relationship with Asia. He argues that, the inconsistencies and exclusions that underpin the convoluted, decentred yet the disturbingly material notion of the stereotype and the post-colonial conditions in which these notions have been formulated. The orientalist condition whereby the other is constantly encountered in a changing dialectic between ‘power and powerlessness’ set up ‘new patterns of resistances and social formations.

Logics of racism reflected in the overt exclusion of the other, become buried in the covert and taken-for-granted ways that minority groups have been spoken about and constructed as other. More recently, Rizvi argues, these discourses have been overlaid with something new as these logics are reformulated as economically driven. A changed and ambivalent conception emerges as the Asian person – the immigrant, the businessman, the international student - is constructed not only as raced but commodified. In a recent book Kenway and Butten (2003) consider the grotesque and rather frightening notion of ‘consuming children’. Their argument is that the consumption and production of education alter the conceptions of the students as a social construct. The marketing of education and of students as goods overlays the identity of the international student with functional utility and social meaning. It is this changed dialectic of derision and desire as it negotiates the already-raced conceptions of community identity and cultural difference that needs to be better understood.

This pilot study of local government schools, in metropolitan, regional and rural state secondary schools in Victoria, Australia suggests several important directions for further research. Discussions about international students in what are government ad community schools need to thought about and analysed defined by the material and conceptual relations of identity and difference and crisscrossed by the politics of consumption and production. The slippery notion that underpins metropolitan notions of multiculturalism is that difference seems to disappear even as it reappears in complex and confused ways. The ambivalent logic, which defined ways that students belonged and did not belong within the school, became increasingly marked in schools that were further from the metropolitan area. In the rural school, the isolation of the mono-cultural school student was impacted upon by the increasingly dangerous presence of the international student. These students become increasingly isolated, separated by the lack of sameness exhibited, materially as well as conceptually. The successfulness and unsuccessfulness of the international student’s contribution to the finances of the school and the politics of desire that underpinned the logic of this
Changing Communities

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About the Author

Dr. Ruth Arber is Lecturer in the Faculty of Education at Deakin University, Melbourne, Victoria where she teaches and researches in language and cultural studies in education. Her work has focused on the conception but also the materiality of identity and cultural difference within an increasingly globalised context. Her most recent research looks at the impact of international students in schools. She has published a number of articles in a range of journals including Race Ethnicity and Education, The International Journal of Inclusive Education, the Journal of Educational change. Melbourne Studies in Education and the Journal of Intercultural Studies.