

# 1. Conceptualizing intercultural understanding within international contexts: challenges and possibilities for education

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## **Introduction: theoretical imprecision**

Many policy initiatives relating to intercultural understanding have been articulated at national, international and supra-national levels, in the current context of rising levels of diversity, increased interconnectivity and more pronounced forms of human mobility (Beck, 2011; Benhabib, 2002; Wiater, 2008; Zapata-Barrero, 2015a). Many initiatives have emerged almost exclusively as reactions to perceived problems associated with cultural diversity policies, in particular, those articulated within multiculturalism (Bradley, 2013; Berry and Southwell, 2011; Castles, 2010). Historically, multiculturalism has been an important policy framework across many émigré societies wanting to manage and facilitate migrant integration (Mansouri, 2015). Yet more recently, questions have been raised as to the overall utility of this policy framework, particularly at a time when problems of integration and social cohesion are being widely reported in public discourse (Akbarzadeh and Mansouri, 2006; Hage, 2011; Ramadan, 2004). Concerns about the ways in which multicultural policies and practices have been understood and implemented are the focus of much recent literature on diversity, race relations and social inclusion (Arber, 2015; Mansouri, 2015).

Many policy-makers and researchers have started to advocate alternative approaches and policies aimed at overcoming the supposed shortcomings of multiculturalism (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2006; Cattle, 2012; James, 2008; Taylor, 2012; Zapata-Barrero, 2015). In this context, the Council of Europe's White Paper on *Intercultural Dialogue, Living Together as Equals in Dignity* (2008) and a series of documents produced by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2006, 2009, 2010, 2013) have been particularly influential in various policy and practice

circles. These papers and subsequent reports from Australia and elsewhere argue for alternative approaches to managing ethno-cultural diversities from different conceptual and historical perspectives. They share the premise that the intercultural approach, as opposed to other approaches to migration and diversity, most notably multiculturalism, offers a new conduit towards 'managing cultural diversity based on shared values and respect for common heritage, cultural diversity and human dignity' (Byram et al., 2009, p. 26). Intercultural dialogue, in this regard, encourages 'the acquisition of knowledges, skills and attitudes – particularly the capacity for reflection and the self-critical disposition for life in culturally diverse societies' (Council of Europe, 2008, p. 94). A key focus remains the role of intercultural dialogue in engendering social cohesion, defined as stated below:

Social cohesion, as understood by the Council of Europe, denotes the capacity of a society to ensure the welfare of all its members, minimizing disparities and avoiding polarization. A cohesive society is a mutually supportive community of free individuals pursuing these common goals by democratic means (*ibid.*, p. 5).

Within this approach, intercultural competence is considered as the practical foundation for achieving and sustaining social peace. Though education is invoked as a key vehicle for acquiring intercultural skills and techniques of immediate relevance to democratic citizenship and culturo-religious diversity, the Council of Europe White Paper nevertheless retains a highly normative and in many ways uni-dimensional tone that raises many questions as to its practical application. Indeed, it approaches one of the key concepts in interculturalism, namely reciprocity, as being essentially the domain of migrants and minority groups, rather than all Europeans, including minority and dominant groups alike.

Arguments within the Council of Europe document, although laudable, add to the differentiation between empowered dominant groups and vulnerable minoritized others. Documents from UNESCO define the relationship succinctly as one of human rights, whereby intercultural competence is described in terms of the responsibilities of the dominant group and 'the need for tolerance and respect for peoples in the world through the inclusion of human rights principles in the school and the curriculum' (2006, p. 7). The highly critiqued notion of 'tolerance', assumed to imply passive acceptance, suggests that cultural and situational differences are not only noted (albeit reluctantly), but also permitted to continue unchallenged (Arber, 2008, 2011). The notion of 'respect' similarly suggests that groups

of people exhibiting difference but who, in this case, represent a silent but empowered 'us' will hold others within our gaze as a matter of admiration and esteem (Rizvi, 2010). The notion of 'human rights' suggests that an empowered group holds a universal and progressive approach towards the assumption of ethical claims, which are de-historicized, seemingly neutral and all inclusive (Brown, 2007). Against this notion of the dominant but universal 'white man' is that of the uncontained 'other' who needs to be constrained from destabilizing the (European) nationalist project (Young, 2003).

This chapter interrogates the ways in which intercultural conception has been defined in diverse contexts, providing the framing context for policy and curriculum measures to work with the manifestations of global population movement, diversity and change. It asks questions the ways in which conversations about intercultural understanding can be broadened to consider how entrenched systemic inequalities, the underlying notional and institutional frameworks that support them, and the mono-cultural and specific privileges and oppression, which are so often their enduring outcome, can be dismantled. To that end, it examines how policy and notional and practical work, in relation to intercultural understanding, can better encompass structural and cultural change regarding the ways in which cross cultural encounters and intercultural relations are shaped and take place.

## **Mono-cultural perspectives**

Despite the stated focus of intercultural understanding to bring together culturally differentiated groups, a mono-cultural mindset still prevails which understands and positions some groups and cultures in opposition to others. The trope of an empowered core group of 'us' vis-a-vis 'others' is interwoven throughout documents related to intercultural understanding, often in ways similar to those advocating multiculturalism. The Council of Europe's White Paper describes the relationship between ourselves and others pragmatically, and as one which 'leaves no room for moral relativism' (2008, p. 11). The legitimacy of the dominant group to assert its authority in relation to minority stakeholders is described in relation to the ways that that 'public authorities' arbitrate fairly (2008, p. 11) in the event that some individual or group does not share 'the universal values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law' (Council of Europe White Paper, 2008, p. 9). Similarly, language learning is explained as a process where minorities must acquire the majority language in order to 'act' as full

citizens (Council of Europe White Paper, 2008, p. 16). 'Minority' language education is described as a matter of enrichment and not a necessity for majority community members. Even the introduction of the concepts of 'intercultural competence' and 'democratic citizenship', a supposed step further from active citizenship, assumes that this discussion is concerned with obstacles for minority individuals rather than one concerned with the rights of white European citizens as members of the dominant cultural group.

Similarly, despite their intention to support better intercultural skills and knowledge for students in culturally differentiated societies, documents such as the UNESCO (2006) *Guidelines on Intercultural Education* contain tropes that reassert a dominant and mono-cultural perspective. The guidelines are concerned with 'managing' othered diverse migrant groups entering contemporary Western contexts. They are framed by the premise that the authors are uniquely qualified to set standards of culture and practice for others and convene the diverse cultural and ideological perspectives made in relation to curriculum and for policy-makers and community members worldwide. UNESCO itself is described as having a unique role as a neutral conveyer of standards and ways of thinking, which can be universally described, categorized and applied.

Intercultural education is conceptualized as framed in enlightenment terms (Bauman, 2000) – such as that of 'universal progress' – progress towards peace and light – and the 'upheaval' and 'dysfunction' that occurs as traditional cultures are brought together and disrupted. The task of the body is an immense one whereby:

In a world experiencing rapid change, and where cultural, political, economic and social upheaval challenges traditional ways of life, UNESCO represents progress and provides objective arbitration able to proscribe educational standards which can bring together differentiated and often disruptive groups. It is concerned with providing education to promote social cohesion and peaceful co-existence [and]...programmes that encourage dialogue between students of different cultures, beliefs and religions...[and] make an important and meaningful contribution to sustainable and tolerant societies. (UNESCO, 2006, p. 7).

The focus of the document's examination of intercultural understanding is the relational process of 'dialogue'. The terms and conditions of intercultural dialogue are framed within an understanding that greater communication and knowledge of 'each other's' lives will bring about the peace and

cohesion sought for throughout the document. This is an ambiguous notion described in Whiteness literature (Arber, 2015; Garner, 2007; Hage, 1997; Preston, 2007) whereby persons ascribed differently by their cultures, beliefs and religions are considered similarly diverse and encouraged to respect and engage with each other on equal terms. The unequal power relations that underpin these conversations are ignored, even as they are reinforced by an omniscient and universal self who describes a vehicle to connect tolerant and sustainable societies. As discussed earlier, the notion of tolerance suggests that 'we' can permit differences exhibited by 'others', however reluctantly. The notion of social sustainability brings together seemingly differentiated ideas: those of intercultural understanding and progress, and biology and the survival of the species itself. The upheaval and danger that underpins the document's concerns about the possibility of conflict emergent from traditional ways of life is placed against its emphasis on education as a way to ameliorate these dangers and bring about the United Nations' vision for universal and sustainable progress. The ultimate aim of the policy of social cohesion and peaceful coexistence brings to view the notion of a differentiated a traditional society, which needs to be tolerated and respected in ways that can be educated about.

A particular role described within UNESCO documentation (2006, 2010, 2013) is that of 'international standard setter' and convenor of diverse cultural and ideological perspectives. Guidelines for standard-setting are described as contributing to understanding and a product of numerous conferences drawing together the standard-setting instruments required to bring about an intercultural approach to education. The standardization and measurement of intercultural understanding normalizes and objectivizes cultural and ethical understandings. It suggests a condition of neutrality, scientific control, objectivity and rationality. It ignores the partiality brought into play in the design and implementation of these measures and the politics of their construction. It provides definition and legitimation to ways of thinking which become understood as universal, de-historicized, neutral and unbiased. The UNESCO paper (2006) suggests that the values and standards it describes have been developed as part of an accredited and rational process. The fact that the conference participants and the UNESCO leadership setting those standards are themselves working through paradigms framed by the terms and conditions of language and culture is not broached. This not only engenders and sustains a false consciousness of objectivity, but also serves to preserve and indeed enhance already dominant social structures and hierarchies.

An important focus of the documents examined in this chapter is the descriptions of different and minority groups and the knowledges and skills required to work with those groups. The project of 'knowing the other' is described within the post-colonial literature as the ways in which dominant representations of 'who they are' and 'who they are not' become powerful such that the narrative of the other becomes all but obliterated (see Arber, 2008; Young, 2003). Arguably, standards such as those described within the UNESCO document (2006) describe what is known about minority groups and how this knowledge is to be practised. Such moves towards dialogue and mutual knowing work to reinforce conversations about the otherness of the other and about the ways in which others can be communicated with; they legitimize rather than work against the structures and notions which support the classed and racialized others. A critical examination of the ways in which intercultural understanding have been described and operationalized, both in Australia and internationally, suggest that despite the good intentions and strategic importance of these policy initiatives, the tropes of identity and difference that frame them often work to entrench rather than shake-up normative understandings and behaviours which support older thinking about identity and difference.

### **Intercultural understanding and multiculturalism**

Crucially, both the Council of Europe and United Nations' documents differentiate between what they define as 'multiculturalism' and the thinking that defines intercultural understanding. Multiculturalism, it is argued, describes a static and unchanging range of differences including linguistic, religious and socio-economic diversity, which remain homogenous and differentiated from the social mainstream. It describes the culturally diverse nature of human society, referring to elements of ethnic or national culture, but also includes linguistic, religious and socio-economic diversity (UNESCO, 2006).

While such policy articulations do envisage education as the main platform for potential intervention endeavours, the fact is that these remain confused and imprecise about what is exactly meant by 'intercultural understanding' and how it is to be operationalized and assessed. The challenge does not only refer to the broad notion of 'intercultural citizen' in the context of the socio-political sphere, but also to intercultural understanding in educational settings. Perhaps the difficulty in unpacking the notion of 'interculturalism' lies in the fact that it means different things to different actors. Discussing the ongoing debate about multiculturalism, Vertovec

and Wessendorf argue that 'it is an illusion to consider 'multiculturalism' as being one philosophy, structure, discourse or set of policy measures. The term is invoked differentially to describe a number of discrete – albeit sometimes overlapping – phenomena' (2004, p. 3). But over time, the critiques of multiculturalism become more prominent and come from all directions. This relates especially to the minimalist celebratory versions of everyday multiculturalism, with the tendency to essentialize 'cultural diversity' (Alibhai-Brown, 2000), keeping it in the ethnic box. And even multicultural education, as a key conduit for multicultural aspirations, lacks the transformative tools capable of challenging, critiquing and changing pedagogical approaches and societal attitudes. Critiques argue that multiculturalism has come to be a 'code word' for the discussion of racism and difference (Arber, 2008). Its core argument, that everyone is the same in their difference, suggests a 'colour-blindness', which glosses over the notional and structural conditions of difference even as it emphasizes them (Arber, 2015; Mansouri, 2015).

The treatment of intercultural understanding becomes even more challenging and complicated as a result of the dearth of intellectual, policy and practice foundations akin to those underpinning multiculturalism in the context of amplified movements of people from diverse cultures and management of the resulting ethno-religious diversity. Meer and Modood (2012, p. 3), focusing on the political dimensions of this debate, argue that 'interculturalism' as compared to multiculturalism is supposed to be more dialogic, less 'groupist', more committed to national attachment and social cohesion, and less illiberal and relativistic. Levey concurs, emphasizing intercultural and multicultural policies' 'geographical and historical variations' (2012, p. 217), highlighting the political nature of the attempt to surpass multiculturalism with interculturalism. Therefore, if we are to accept a strictly positive conception of 'interculturalism', the question remains: how to operationalize, implement and assess the acquisition of intercultural knowledge and associated skills within educational practices, without duplicating multicultural education's deficits?

## **Intercultural understanding in international contexts**

Definitions of interculturalism and intercultural understanding, and the differentiation from multiculturalism, have been evidenced differently in different contexts. The conversations and silences that also underpin multiculturalism the ways in which interculturalism is defined, and codified in different ways and in different jurisdictions. In UNESCO (2006)

documents, the dynamic and procedural aspects of diversity are described as aspects of interculturalism, as are notions of equity, dialogue and exchange. As such, interculturalism is understood as going beyond the unchanging characteristics ascribed to multiculturalism and to the creation of understanding of, respect for and dialogue between different cultural groups. Tropes of peaceful co-existence, respect, tolerance, sustainability and dialogue are ascribed only to interculturalism, and described as a:

dynamic concept [that] ... refers to evolving relations between cultural groups. It has been defined as 'the existence of interaction of diverse cultures and the possibility of generating shared cultural expressions through dialogue and mutual respect.' Interculturality presupposed interculturality and results from 'intercultural' exchange and dialogue on the local, regional, national or international level (UNESCO, 2006, p. 8).

Alternatively, the Council of Europe White Paper (2008, p. 9) defines the central focus of intercultural understanding as that of dialogue, which in this version, is to be open and respectful. Different from the UNESCO (2006) document, their somewhat ambiguous definition describes dialogue as being about personal communication between individuals and groups. The exchange of viewpoints is seen as central to this definition, as it is considered representative of both one's 'background' and one's 'worldview'. The term 'background' encodes the notion that ways of understanding and behaving are evidenced within familial and contextual environments and are in a sense primordial in origin. The term 'worldview' describes a viewpoint inclusive of notions of ontological conception. Intrinsic to the document is the understanding that such terms – whether of ontology or performance – can be described in terms of practice and perception. Intercultural dialogue is defined as:

a process that comprises an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage, on the basis of mutual understanding and respect. It requires the freedom and ability to express oneself, as well as the willingness and capacity to listen to the views of others. Intercultural dialogue contributes to political, social, cultural and economic integration and the cohesion of culturally diverse societies. It fosters equality, human dignity and a sense of common purpose. It aims to develop a deeper understanding of diverse worldviews and practices, to increase co-operation and participation (or the freedom to make choices), to allow personal growth and transformation, and to



promote tolerance and respect for the other (Council of Europe White Paper, 2008, p. 9).

The tropes of world peace and progress – so central to the UNESCO documents – are not mentioned here. Instead, there is a central focus on tropes of equality, dignity and common purpose. The social justice perspective introduced by the trope of equality is placed against two conflictual narratives – the dignity of the person and the common purpose of the public sphere. The notion that participation is about the freedom to make choices needs to be unpacked. Choice requires that the notional and structural terms and conditions that define difference and social participation be challenged and dismantled. This is not broached in these documents.

The amelioration of unequal power relations existing between those belonging to majority/minority groups is brought about through a process of:

Integration (social integration, inclusion) [which is] is understood as a two-sided process and as the capacity of people to live together with full respect for the dignity of each individual, the common good, pluralism and diversity, non-violence and solidarity, as well as their ability to participate in social, cultural, economic and political life. It encompasses all aspects of social development and all policies. It requires the protection of the weak, as well as the right to differ, to create and to innovate. Effective integration policies are needed to allow immigrants to participate fully in the life of the host country. Immigrants should, as everybody else, abide by the laws and respect the basic values of European societies and their cultural heritage. Strategies for integration must necessarily cover all areas of society, and include social, political and cultural aspects. They should respect immigrants' dignity and distinct identity and to take them into account when elaborating policies (Council of Europe, White Paper, 2008, p. 6).

In the Council of Europe White Paper (*ibid.*), the constituent elements of integration and intercultural dialogue are understood as dynamic and negotiated within 'unequally empowered shared spaces'. Cultural backgrounds and worldviews interweave with one another to encapsulate cultures which are hybrid and new. The systemic frames that shape the unequally empowered shared spaces, and the unequal power relations and structures that frame the dynamic integration of differentiated group identities and epistemologies, remain unchallenged within the document.

A document search of sites published by the United States (US) Government did not uncover any official policy documents that use or discuss the term 'intercultural understanding'. A blog distributed by the US Department of Education mentions the term, but in quite a different sense than that discussed in the documents so far, and does not call for multicultural or for intercultural policy. Rather, it calls for the government to maintain rather than dismantle particular educational programming.

In Canada, the official website of the Government of Canada states:

Canada was the first country to adopt multiculturalism as an official policy. Documents reaffirm the value and dignity of all Canadian citizens regardless of their racial or ethnic origins, their language or their religious affiliation. Canadian multiculturalism is fundamental to our belief that all citizens are equal. Multiculturalism ensures that all citizens can keep their identities, can take pride in their ancestry and have a sense of belonging. (Government of Canada, n.d. a)

The manifestation of policies of multiculturalism are understood as bringing about intercultural understanding, as it 'gives Canadians a feeling of security and self-confidence, making them more open to, and accepting of, diverse cultures. The Canadian experience has shown that multiculturalism encourages racial and ethnic harmony and cross-cultural understanding' (ibid.). The search for references to interculturalism by the Government of Canada refers only to the website of the Canadian Department for Foreign Affairs. The Centre for Intercultural Learning provides cultural information about a breadth of topics (e.g. communication styles, display of emotion, dress punctuality and formality, preferred managerial qualities, hierarchy and decision-making, relationship building and so on), provided as a series of cultural perspectives from Canadian and local points of view. It is difficult to work out how the terms 'local' and 'Canadian' are defined. It seems that locals are born in countries outside Canada and are not of Anglo or Francophone background (Government of Canada n.d. b).

## **Intercultural understanding in education**

The examination of policy statements and sites in diverse world contexts suggests that conceptions of intercultural understanding are described and operationalized differently. Too often, the systemic conditions that frame the representation of identity and difference within those documents are described in terms that emerge from entrenched notions of self and others, and remain silent about, or describe in euphemisms, the ways to

reshape them. Educational institutions provide particular sites from which conversations about identity and difference, and their redesign in terms of intercultural understanding, can be discussed and engaged with (Bennett, 2003). Schools have reflected and continue to reflect social trends, cultural processes and intercultural relations that characterize the broader societies within which they exist (Mansouri and Kamp, 2007). Efforts to deal with social inequalities and cultural oppressions must also commence at schools as sites for such resistance (Delgado and Stefancic, 2013). Thus, supranational agencies have assigned schools the responsibility to ensure that future generations have the intercultural knowledge and skills to build interculturalism, social inclusion and cohesion (see, for example, Council of Europe, 2008; UNESCO, 2006, 2009, 2013). The UNESCO report on *Education for Intercultural Understanding* for instance, is explicit about the central role of schooling in this agenda: 'Education systems, schools and teachers are therefore responsible for strengthening the child's cultural identity and values, while also promoting respect and understanding for the culture of others' (2010, p. 9). The school curriculum becomes the arbiter between those cultures and the purveyor of competencies, attitudes and values that appear as neutral and are placed against the cultural symbols of other and traditional cultures.

The problem in the intercultural understanding debate, and ongoing academic and policy articulations in Australia and internationally, is the imprecise and at times confusing perspectives articulated and introduced in different contexts, all claiming to deal with intercultural understanding from a particular angle. The literature abounds with terms and concepts such as 'awareness', 'understanding', 'capacity', 'ability', 'orientation', 'repertoire', 'knowledge', 'attitude' and 'skills', to name just a few (Praxmarer, 2014). These terms reflect different disciplinary and philosophical perspectives on the cognitive, pedagogical and social processes involved in understanding and relating to increasingly complex manifestations of ethnic, racial and cultural diversity in society. This complex amalgam of perspectives muddies the meaning and clarity of interculturalism as an object of study, and reflects the political dynamics of curriculum development and design.

UNESCO (2006, 2009, 2010, 2013) has taken up the challenge of attempting to clarify the meaning of interculturalism through a series of policy statements and guidelines designed to provide a framework for education systems to incorporate interculturalism into school curriculum and practice, including a conceptual and operational framework for intercultural competencies. In a series of documents, UNESCO (2010) conceptualizes

intercultural understanding as a component of Education for Sustainable Development that encompasses principles, content, values and skills. From a pedagogical perspective, it is suggested that 'learning activities include a mix of knowing, understanding, valuing and acting' (UNESCO, 2010, p. 22). A framework of competencies describes how culture is enacted through communication via language, and suggests that understanding one's own cultural background is a prerequisite to learning about other cultures and as a way to 'cope [during] intercultural interactions'.

Promoting international education policies, as the Council of Europe and UNESCO has done with intercultural education, is a difficult task. Education systems are complex and vary across states and even local districts (Leeman, 2003). In the next section of this chapter, we focus on how interculturalism has been operationalized and implemented in Australia, as an example of how the international move toward intercultural education has been taken up in one specific nation state.

### **Intercultural understanding in the Australian curriculum**

Since the 1970s, multicultural education has been a core feature of the formal school curriculum of Australian states and territories. The curriculum emphasized learning about and celebrating the ethnic and cultural diversity of Australia's multicultural identity. In the first national Australian curriculum, introduced in 2013, multicultural education was replaced with the cross-curricula area of intercultural understanding – one of seven 'general capabilities' to be cultivated in students during their schooling. In curriculum terms, the general capabilities are procedural knowledges. These described non-disciplinary knowledge, understandings and skills that policy-makers and curriculum designers deem students will need in their future lives, and followed from other such statements including a framework for values education focusing on civics and citizenship (Australian Government, 2005) and the *Report on Intercultural Language Learning* (Liddicoat et al., 2003). The incorporation of values education into Australian education policy reflected both an international trend and local concerns that public schools were failing to build students' 'character' (Lovat, 2009, p. xiv). The prominence of interculturalism in languages education came about because forms of procedural knowledge such as interaction, reflection and responsibility are necessary for successful communication – more than linguistic knowledge and skills. The intercultural understanding capability expands on this agenda and aims to produce:

active and informed citizens with an appreciation of Australia's social, cultural, linguistic and religious diversity, and the ability to relate to and communicate across cultures at local, regional and global levels [and to cultivate] values and dispositions such as curiosity, care, empathy, reciprocity, respect and responsibility, open-mindedness and critical awareness, and support new and positive intercultural behaviours [for] learning to live together (ACARA, 2014, p. 1).

Teachers and schools are expected to integrate the intercultural understanding capability into all subject and discipline areas throughout all years of schooling. In practical terms, the move from multicultural to intercultural education represents a shift in focus from knowledge (learning about) to knowledge *and* practice (learning to do). In accomplishing this goal, the curriculum expects students to develop three intercultural dispositions or capabilities throughout their schooling: expressing empathy, demonstrating respect and taking responsibility (ACARA, 2014).

In Australia's federated political system, the different states and territories have control over the translation of national educational initiatives, including the curriculum, into related policies, guidelines and practices that are consistent with state and territory agendas. The individualization of interculturalism reflects broader social shifts in community and state responsibilities and accountability to individuals (Rose, 1992). Victoria, for example, has redefined the intercultural understanding general capability as a 'personal and social capability' to better reflect the dialogical relationship between individuals and their social worlds. At the local level, our experience working with schools in Victoria that are seeking to accomplish the Australian curriculum's agenda to build intercultural citizens showed that the shift from multicultural to intercultural education raised fundamental but important challenges for schools. In particular, these included the requirement to move beyond learning *about* racial and cultural diversity. This knowledge focus encouraged the essentialization of cultures and cultural differences, and was vulnerable to being reduced to simplistic, stereotyped representations of cultural traditions, colloquially known as the 'food, flags, and festivals' approach (Arber, 2008). Accordingly, teachers and schools had to confront the pedagogical challenge of how develop both intercultural knowledge and practices among students (Mansouri and Percival-Wood, 2008; Mansouri and Trembath, 2005).

At the national level, however, a consequence of federalism is that there is no nationwide agreement on the meaning of intercultural understanding or the optimum processes for implementing its agendas in schools. Discussions

about intercultural relationships in Australia are influenced by socio-cultural and identity theory, as distinct from the human rights and enlightenment perspective of the UNESCO documents, and the Council of Europe's moves between discussions of institutional racism and the description of culture as artistic and creative. The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA, 2014) document acknowledges the work of theories in several fields including cultural studies (Hall, 1997), language education (Kramsch, 1998; Liddicoat et al., 1999), multicultural education (Banks and Banks, 2004; Noble and Poynting, 2000), and more broadly in sociology, linguistics and anthropology. Acknowledging the differentiated theoretical and strategic perspectives taken by these theorists, the ACARA document attests to the fuzzy nature of an intercultural approach, adding that, given its diverse origins, it is not surprising that the nature and place of intercultural learning are by no means settled and the definition of the term 'culture' is not agreed upon. The disjunction between the different perspectives, which underpins thinking in this document, can easily be seen in the definition of intercultural understanding itself:

In the Australian curriculum, students develop intercultural understanding as they learn to value their own cultures, languages, beliefs and those of others. They come to understand how personal, group and national identities are shaped, and the variable and changing nature of culture (ACARA, 2004, p. 1).

Notions of culture and identity are understood as multidimensional, negotiated and dynamic. At the same time, they are envisaged as unidimensional, static and primordial, as sets of cultural and linguistic characteristics and beliefs that belong to selves and others.

Regardless of the complexity of definitions of culture and identity, it remains unclear what culture and identity mean, and what the characteristics of and relationships between these discrete differentiated and personal group and national identities are. For the purposes of curriculum, the characteristics of culture and identity are described as those assessable as capabilities. Intercultural relationships are understood as relating to the assessment of student capabilities – the accumulation of skills and knowledges, and description and measurement of the ability to achieve them. Cultural understanding is a matter of doing rather than knowing. The capabilities delineate what and how this doing is to be done. They involve 'students in learning about and engaging with diverse cultures in ways that recognize commonalities and differences, create connections with others and cultivate mutual respect' (ACARA, 2004, p. 1).

There are important differences between the Australian and UNESCO documents. Unlike standards, the notion of competencies suggests flexibility in the way that students are assessed as having different abilities to carry out prescribed skills and knowledges. The focus of intercultural relationships – to learn about and engage with diverse cultures – is different to the concept of ‘knowing’ – to be aware of something as fact or truth – described within the UNESCO document. Learning is a more modest concept, meaning to gain or acquire knowledge of or skill in something by being taught. It does not assume an all-knowing watcher who knows the facts about the cultures of others. The word ‘engage’, meaning to participate and to be involved with diverse cultures, is different from notions of tolerance described in older Australian documents and the UNESCO document. The focus of such engagement – mutual respect – suggests an appreciation of the worth of others and consideration of their feelings, wishes and rights.

Nevertheless, the concept ‘competencies’ continues to legitimize, essentialize and standardize skills and knowledges related to culture, identity and difference. The notion ‘diverse’ suggests that individuals and groups within Australia are differentiated culturally in ways that are clearly defined and static. The notion that groups can be described in terms of their commonalities as well as their differences adds to this perception, and brings to view critiques of multiculturalism. The notion that all groups are understood as the same in their difference is suggestive of the terms and conditions of ‘colour-blindness’. Difference is simplistically defined as static, discrete and essential. The accommodation of difference is reduced to the implementation of a set of cultural skills and knowledges, removed from consideration of racializations and of structural and notional systems which include some and exclude others differently. The notion of respect is a relatively passive concept in that it does not say how the rights of others will be protected and goes only some way to challenge the critique of that concept. Moreover, the ACARA document resurrects many of the same tropes used within discussions of policies for multicultural education:

The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians recognizes the fundamental role that education plays in building a society that is cohesive and culturally diverse, and that values Australia’s Indigenous cultures (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 4).

The notion of cohesion placed against cultural diversity suggests that older notions of unity within diversity remain central to discussions of multiculturalism. The valuation of Australian Indigenous cultures is a different and important addition to the discussion. From the subsequent

document from ACARA, this next paragraph shifts from the discussion of relationships between differentiated cultural groups living within Australia to outlining the skills and knowledges young people require to move internationally in a culturally differentiated world:

Intercultural understanding is an essential part of living with others in the diverse world of the twenty-first century. It assists young people to become responsible local and global citizens equipped through their education of living and working together in an interconnected world (ACARA, 2004, p. 1).

The notion that intercultural understanding is concerned with assisting young people to be responsible local and global citizens does not apply to the amelioration of the structural and notional conditions that elevate some and provide barriers to others. Rather, it applies to the responsibilities of all to gain the requisite skills and knowledges to work within a world in which such systemic and unequally empowered differences are encoded as cultural. Whereas documents for multicultural education discussed the terms and conditions under which different migrant, religious and ethnic groups can live together within an Australian context, descriptions of intercultural education describe the personal competencies students require to live and work both in Australia and internationally. This recoding of the conversation neglects discussions about social justice and equity, which underpin earlier documents. The systemic and normative structures that allow some to partake in Australian culture differently remain out of view. The subsumption of the intercultural and international skills as those required for international communication and travel completely ignores the (often elitist) ways in which mobility is enabled differently for some than it is for others. The ACARA document attempts to expand the ways that notions of identity and culture are discussed and assessed:

Intercultural understanding encourages students to make connections between their own world and the world of other, to build on shared interests and commonalities and to negotiate or mediate difference. It develops student's abilities to communicate and emphasize with others and to analyse intercultural experiences critically. It offers opportunities for them to consider their own beliefs in a new light and so gain insight into themselves and others (2004, p. 1).

The personal qualities of communication, empathy and analysis and the argument that intercultural relationships require the examination of the self before others makes some demands on self-understanding and



learning. Nevertheless, the ACARA document upholds the notion that the attributes of culture and identity are discrete, separate and unidimensional in their approach to ontology, performance and relationships. Intercultural understanding here is a personal rather than social project, whereby the development of the skills and knowledge required makes behavioural and cognitive demands on each individual, in order to express particular dispositions: habits of empathy, respect and responsibility.

## **Conclusion**

There is no doubt that part of the difficulty of pursuing an intercultural understanding agenda within an educational setting has been the lack of conceptual clarity and precision as to what specific competencies are teachable and what the assessment framework might be for testing such pedagogic approaches (Besley and Peters, 2012). Despite numerous attempts by international agencies such as UNESCO, as well as certain states such as Australia, curriculum reform has not always reflected the pedagogical requirements of intercultural understanding practice. This is also the case with teacher training and professional development programmes, which have struggled to keep up with the demands of intercultural practice in increasingly diverse schools. These conceptual and professional challenges have been compounded by the school organization leadership responsible for initiating, implementing and sustaining such change, which has at times failed to sustain these efforts against an environment dominated by retentionphilic and overall rankings, particularly in relation to numeracy and literacy (Kamp and Mansouri, 2010).

This chapter engages with the observation that the commendable intentions and strategies discussed within intercultural understanding policy documents, promulgated internationally and in Australia, too often remain framed by politics of representation (see Hall, 1997) not dissimilar to those that shaped documents of multiculturalism. Arguably, such tropes of alterity need to be interrogated if the intercultural understanding project's intention – to bring together groups and individuals in socially just and respectful ways – is to be carried out. Greater attention to policies that support anti-racism and strategies to dismantle systemic and normative conditions, which enable some groups and individuals and exclude others, is an important first step to furthering the effective nature of intercultural understanding and policy-making.

The future of intercultural understanding in Australia and globally, both within education and in other policy areas, will depend very much on how it is defined, designed, resourced, implemented and assessed. It is encouraging to see UNESCO taking the lead on this at the level of conceptualization and overall pedagogic articulation (UNESCO, 2013). From this supra-national perspective, intercultural understanding competencies should constitute the foundation of an emerging 'universal communicator' – an individual who is at once a critical thinker and a reflexive open interlocutor, and who has knowledge about their own culture in its own right, but also in relation to other cultures. But as UNESCO (2013) reminds us, there is still a need to clarify, synthesize and operationalize what we all mean by intercultural understanding competencies:

Synthesizing research from multiple disciplines and cultures into a coherent whole requires ongoing effort because such research continues within a variety of disciplines. Just as one definition is inadequate (and inappropriate), so one disciplinary approach, or investigations prepared by scholars based in a single country, will be insufficient to providing a full understanding of a complex topic (UNESCO, 2013, p. 24).

Dealing with difference and managing diversity requires ongoing sustained policies and enabling strategies. This is particularly the case in the critical area of education, where youth are exposed to diversity in all its manifestations and are expected to become equipped with the required intellectual tools and educational capabilities to successfully navigate intercultural relations (Berry, 2013; Cattle, 2015a, 2015b). The effort to overcome cultural racism and social disempowerment is an ongoing struggle that our increasingly diverse and interconnected societies must win. Otherwise, there is a real risk of slipping back into discriminatory, exclusionary frameworks reminiscent of the racist immigration policies of years gone by.

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