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Interrogating ‘imagined’ communities: exploring the impact of international students in local schools

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This paper suggests new directions understanding the impact of international students in schools. It is concerned with the ways that community representatives discuss these students and their impact on the community of the school. Recent literatures describe communities such as those of schools as ones of perception and materiality whereby some are included differently than others. Discourses such as multiculturalism and monoculturalism, which have traditionally shaped these discussions about community relations, have always been ambivalent. They take on new forms as local/global interaction, and the individualistic and market-driven changes that lead to the arrival of international students have consequences for the everyday lives of school community members. These need to be investigated if the location of international students in local school communities is to be properly described and interrogated.

Keywords: international students; identity; difference; cosmopolitanism; commodification; schools

Introduction

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. 5)

Over the last decade, the number of international students in Australian secondary schools has increased as governments implement a ‘user-pays’ system and neoliberal policies (Matthews 2002; Taylor et al. 1997). In question is the impact of these changes on what have until now been local and community schools. For Anne Smythe, Vice Principal of Chadwick secondary college, the consequences are multifaceted. International students bring important international and intercultural skills into the school and encourage ‘a healthy respect for travelling and appreciation of other cultures’. Nevertheless, the presence of international students within the school is a ‘test’ of ‘our tolerance and respect’. Their poor English skills and lack of understanding of everyday cultural conditions are ‘a challenge’ that makes it hard to ‘promote the program’ and to understand ‘its strengths’ Students and teachers no longer know how ‘to behave’, and the ‘benefits’ of the program and the international students entering within the program often seems tenuous.

Australian secondary school communities have become, almost unawares, drawn into a complex, often turbulent global world. Demands from overseas students for a ‘western’ and
English education, and local demand for international and intercultural experiences, have resulted in the introduction of a growing number of international programs (Matthews and Sidhu 2005; Delanty 2006). Educational goods, teachers and students move between countries on interchange, tourist and fee-paying programs (Apple, Kenway, and Singh 2005; Arber 2006). School students exchange visits with sister schools, visit countries of curriculum interest, and study on exchange programs. International fee-paying students have become a particular, and increasingly popular, manifestation of these changes (Matthews 2002; Edwards and Tudball 2002). Public schools – dependent almost entirely on government funding, and local community participation and support – can source funding and clients from outside Australia. Over 200 Victorian schools take international students, as do a large proportion of non-government schools, and an emerging commercial market. The enormous success of these programs into what are local and community, government schools in Victoria have helped to make Australia a leading player in school education provision (Australia Bureau of Statistics 2003).

In this paper, I examine how school communities that have become ‘international’ in this way conceptualise the impact of international fee-paying students into what have been local and government secondary schools. Preliminary data taken from eight case studies of Victorian state secondary schools – four within metropolitan Melbourne and four within regional and rural centres – highlight the tensions that lie between communal perceptions of identity and intentions to provide good and viable curriculum for all of their students. Like the Vice Principal cited at the beginning of the paper, teachers interviewed in the research are concerned with the development of international student English language skills, and cultural readiness and the ease with which local and international students could develop relationships and work together. Intertwined with these discussions are others which suggest that these students are different and belong differently within the community. Such conversations are concerned with the amount of difference (cultured, raced, classed, academic) that can be accommodated within the school community and the costs and benefits of bringing international students and their attendant differences into the community. They describe a binary between ‘those’ students who are ‘coming in’ to ‘us’ and whose presence is ‘a challenge’, and ‘our’ students, who need to think about ‘all the benefits here’.

Investigated here are the day-to-day experiences that schools representatives discuss when they speak about the impact of international students on their school. These conversations explore genuine tensions regarding the ways that international students can best be included within the school. Discourses such as multiculturalism and monoculturalism, which have traditionally shaped such discussions about community relations and belonging, have always been ambivalent. They take on new forms as local/global interaction and the individualistic and market-driven changes which lead to the arrival of international students have consequences for the everyday lives of school community members.

My exploration is in three parts. In the first, I exemplify my investigation with data from my school study. Beneath conversations about day-to-day experiences of school life, I find others that define the ways that school members understand their school communities and the place of international students within them. Such discussions about the impact of international students in schools are predicated upon notions of identity and difference, community and belonging, and economic and global contingency. The exploration of these notional constructs makes up the second section of the paper. Such notions of community are ones of ‘imagination’ that serve to define who community members are and the ways they can belong. Traditional and contradictory discourses monoculturalism/ multiculturalism, under pressure from technological change and globalising trends, become intertwined with newer discourses of cosmopolitanism. In the final section, I argue that beneath discussions about
international students are others that define the community of the school and the ways that international students might enter and work within it. These place international students tenuously within changed and increasingly complex local communities. It is these perceptions of community and its outsiders, as well as their relation to the contradictory but increasingly pervasive logics of cosmopolitan discourse, that need to be explored here.

**International students in a local school**

My project, to investigate the impact of fee-paying international students into what have been government and mostly local and community secondary schools, is taken from a pilot student of eight schools (four rural and four urban). By means of focused, open-ended questions I purposefully interviewed a sample of school representatives, including the Vice Principal (usually also the international students coordinator), English language and class teachers. Following from grounded and naturalistic research methods (Guba and Lincoln 1999; Strauss and Corbin 1998), I conversed with school representatives about the implementation and impact of international student programs: the marketing of these programs, service provision, pedagogy and curriculum change. My interest was to describe the everyday events that exemplify the practice and experience of these programs and to explore the debates about policies and programs that criss-cross these narratives. In a third move, I sought to explore these narratives otherwise; to expose the binaries that define their terms and conditions and make explicit the ontological conditions of their framing (Lather 1991). Such analysis examines the data from each of three directions: individual practice; fields of debate; and maps of normalised conception. It interrogates the maps of normalised conception shaping and shaped by these activities and experiences, and the fields of debate and practice that structure them (Arber 2005, 2006, 2008).

Data taken from two schools in my study – one metropolitan, one rural – gives substance to this discussion and allows its intricacies to be investigated more extensively. The first school, Kilnoon Secondary College, houses a population of 520 students. Sited in the southeastern suburbs of Melbourne, the school stands apart from the heavy traffic and light industry that impact on nearby neighbourhoods. Instead, suburban brick residences with small but well-kept gardens surround the school. The school has a largely cosmopolitan population of first- and second-generation migrant students originating from Southeast Asia. Willis explains that international students are well accepted within the school community, as:

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

Willis argues that Kilnoon secondary school is already a cosmopolitan school. The ‘culture shock’ he believes would usually underpin such difference is ameliorated because the school already has ‘a range of students’ from varying countries. Students and teachers are accustomed to seeing students from ‘many different nationalities’. Two separate and potentially divergent notions, which so often disrupt such multicultural tropes, underpin Willis’s comments. On the one hand, all students are understood as ‘different’ and therefore they are the same in their difference. On the other hand, some students are more different than others because they come from different nationalities, such as those from Cambodia and Vietnam. Thus, even as 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 understood as being different.

Willis’s argument, that the presence of international students at this multicultural metropolitan school is of little consequence, is complicated as it becomes difficult to define who belongs within the community. The population of the school 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.

Such conversations tap into the ambivalences so often noted within conversations about Australian multiculturalism as they include some local students differently within the community (Singh 1998; Rizvi 1994; Arber 2008). Notions of ‘Australian’, never clearly demarcated, remain confused. The school is 50% Australian when you describe the number of students who have lived in Australia all of their lives and who have assumed traditional ‘Aussie’ cultural characteristics. These Australian students confuse the boundaries of community belonging, as their different appearance means that they do not ‘look Aussie’ even as they otherwise display Australian cultural characteristics: ‘they wear Aussie; they eat Aussie; they watch Aussie’. 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. By default, a large and newly-arrived immigrant population that adds complexity to the other 50% of such a ‘big mixture’ never quite looks or acts ‘Aussie’.

Willis’s difficulties in defining the ways international students belong within the school are exacerbated by the economic rationale for bringing them there. Even as the school provides whatever the students might need, Willis argues that:

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 it’s 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.

The international program at Kilnoon has been most successful in a business sense: it ‘pays for itself’ and ‘provides facilities for other students in the school’. In this sense, international students are already defined as being 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 that ‘they’ need, while in return they supply money that is ‘available for all students’. The tension that exists between the concept of ‘all students’ and ‘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, as now there is money available ‘for all students’. On the other hand, these students are already outsiders. The ‘advantage of having them’ is that ‘it easily pays for itself’ and ‘provides facilities for other students in the school’.

Even as Willis sees his students as the same in their difference, the sense that they are nevertheless ‘different’ is impacted on by other nations: cultural diversity and class distinction. The understanding that international students in this working-class school bring different academic achievements and aspirations means that:
Again, you are really caught a bit, because you don’t know whether to publicise that these are international students and therefore create, as I said, this small group of sort of elite students; and while we are encouraging students to be elite, we don’t want them to be so special that they won’t even be accepted by the other students, and so on. So we keep their names and presence down to what we think is acceptable levels.

Willis deliberates over whether to advertise the presence of international students, as their achievement adds to the status of the school, or to refrain from advertising these differences on the grounds that such advertising might make the students so ‘special’ that they are not accepted by the others. He wants teachers and community members to know who these students are, so they can continue to support international students, even as he wants to keep the identities of these students anonymous so that they do not become the subject of adulation or envy.

Implicit in the contradictions are stereotypes that describe the entry of moneyed and academically aspirant students into what is otherwise a lower-middle-class local school community. These are understood in perverse relation to others which define international students as lacking in cultural and language skills, in need of extra help, who might bring down educational standards. Placed on top of the ambivalent logic of multiculturalism, commodification and liberalism through which Willis defines school thinking, the international student remains as another and different presence. Even as Willis acknowledges how all students are the same in their difference, he includes some students differently from others within the community. The racialised context of this differentiation is criss-crossed by other ambivalent discourses. The international student is wanted, as the bringer of much-needed funding; and admired, as someone elite; even as he or she is someone who must pay for him or herself, must not be understood as too special, and whose level of presence should remain at ‘acceptable levels’.

Corrumba Secondary school provides a different example of the ways that a community imagined its social world. High on the hill, overlooking the residential areas of a rural centre, Corrumba College is only kilometres from Victoria’s rugged coastline. The old yellow-brick buildings sprawl amongst outlying paddocks and the rich pastures of Victoria’s dairy and encroaching sheep and wheat belt. The concrete stone design of the school’s grandiose administration towers over an immense bus park where 1450 students are bussed daily to the school from the city and the surrounding countryside. The high school is considered highly academic, with results that include it alongside the top academic schools within Victoria. Its students go on to study at Melbourne, Monash and Deakin Universities. The school has 18 international students, mostly from Japan.

Vice Principal, Lester Finch, and teacher Susan Reynalds give ‘two reasons’ for bringing international students into the schools:

Reynalds: One is, it’s a good fundraiser…
Finch: But also, it’s good for our kids, because they’re isolated from any kind of ethnic traditions there, aren’t we…
Reynalds: …it’s pretty monocultural here.

Once again, the international student is considered first and foremost a business proposition, a ‘good fundraiser’ for the school. ‘It’ describes the program that will bring money to the school. International students themselves are not discussed here. Moreover, the presence of international students is understood as being good for ‘our kids’, as the ‘ethnic traditions’ that come with the arrival of the international student provide school community members with an opportunity to become more familiar with other peoples and cultures. The
depersonalisation of the international student as a business commodity is placed against the seemingly self-explanatory ‘our kids’, who represent a community that is essentially ‘monocultural’. The underlying understanding that the conditions of who we are as a community remain silent and unexplained is much discussed in the literature. Those who are ‘us’ remains as an almost empty category understood in relation to cultural differences exemplified by migrant and ethnic groups living in the city and by international students.

Once again, perceptions of the international student are permeated by ambivalent conceptions of identity and difference. 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 school community. Ethnic traditions, which are more apparent in the city and which 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, normalised, seemingly empty notion of monoculturalism.

Such difference is at the same time hugely problematic – ‘a big ask for the Australian kids’:

…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 it’s hard at lunchtime to be always trying to include this one in. Explain jokes three 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 other’s parties and they go to weekends away and things.

Finch’s view is that the Australian students have tried to help out, inviting international students to their parties and helping to integrate them into the school community. Nevertheless, local students at the school have found the arrival of international students into their school difficult. The language and cultural understandings necessary to do seemingly simple things – telling jokes, including students within the playground – put a strain on everyday relationships. When the novelty of having international students wears off, the ‘Australian’ students find interaction with international students increasingly difficult. The international student presents with different cultural and language attributes. These are in the first instance something different and a novelty, something exotic. Increasingly, they become something difficult, something that local students need to help out with.

Teachers have also found things difficult. 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, it’s hard to have a non-English-speaker in your classroom, particularly if they’re doing an exam that’s going to be rated.

International students have been encouraged to come to the school as a business venture, but also as a way of reconciling what is understood as a ‘monocultural’ perspective within the school. The international student is understood as representing ethnic difference that is more commonly found in more urban and ‘multicultural’ schools. Their cultural difference is novel and exciting at first, something that the students and teachers and the school need ‘help’ to overcome. At the same time, the differences brought by international students are difficult to cater for, and the cause of a great deal of anxiety. Moreover, the international student can be frightening – even dangerous:
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 any more than that from one country, because they do stick too much together and they don’t mix enough. It’s dangerous.

Despite the efforts of teachers and students at the school to help integrate students into the school, international students continue to mix mostly with each other and speak together in their first language. Finch is concerned that these initial differences will remain a permanent fixture, a potentially divisive force within the school.

I am concerned by a second theme that underpins his discussion: the international student as a separate and worrying presence within the school. Difference, here, is a 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 something that needs to be better controlled. 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 encourages students, particularly the boys, to be separate and inside:

A bit of a girl/boy thing too. 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. … It’s when they feel safe, I suppose, and it’s lunchtime recess issues, so in classes they have to, because they’re 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.

International students, particularly the boys, are attracted to the ESL room, where they get support from each other and have access to the teachers.

A second theme underpins this argument. Even as Finch sympathetically describes the ESL room as an island, a place of safety for the international student, his concern is that it represents a danger to the school community. ‘They’, the international student, remain apart from the school community. What is necessary is that ‘they have to mix with others’. Even as ‘we’ have the power ‘to kick them out, ‘their’ congregation within the computer room is a sympathetic but worrying presence.

Moreover, 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 in with bike-riding expeditions:

Reynalds: …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 they’re 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 one’s in Year 9, he’s on the bike trip now. He went to Apollo Bay and his father…

Finch: …they mix in with the other kids…

Reynalds: There’s one in Year 9 and one in Year 8. The Year 8 one in particular is quite happy and chatty…

Finch: …he plays at lunchtimes…

Reynalds: Yeah. Whereas the older one, he’s a much more reserved person just by nature. He’s gone on this bike ride with 20 kids or something.

Finch: And the boys have got him in, and he plays soccer or whatever at lunchtime with the boys.
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 was happy has not been altogether successful in his integration into the school. His low study score is not only ‘an issue’ for the student, but impacts on the ‘overall results’ of the community as a whole:

And the other issue, too, 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.

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, this melding of the definitions between difference and the community marks out real boundaries between international students and the school community. These are made within the paradoxical relations entangled within the tropes of monoculturalism, multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism, criss-crossed as they are by discourses of commodification, race, class and ethnicity. They are represented by discussions about the ‘bad’ student sitting separate in the island of the ESL room and the ‘good’ student who has failed all of his subjects.

**Imagining community**

*The terrain of the imagination*

Interwoven into teachers’ discussions about the impact of international students in their school are others that discuss the ways that international students are included or not included within the community. Students are wanted for their raced, cultural and language attributes and their asset value is of concern when these quality notions are perceived as being in opposition to school community aims and aspirations. At Kilnoon Secondary College, Willis argues that international student programs have been successful business ventures and that few inter-ethnic tensions exist because teachers and students are already used to working with diverse cultural and national identities. He expresses some concern that students might be included differently as they represent different educational achievements, aspirations and demands within the school. At Corrumba Secondary School, Finch and Reynolds agree that students bring fiscal benefits along with intercultural and international experiences to a isolated and monocultural community. They find the impact of international students upon the school an uncomfortable one, as they are unprepared for the cultural and academic changes to curriculum, programs and relations that international students require.

Such definitions of community and the terms and conditions of belonging within it need to be investigated as ones of ‘imagination’ (Arber 2005, 2006). Benedict Anderson’s (1991) description of the nation as a particular kind of ‘imagined’ entity is concerned with the socio-cultural condition of contemporary communities as of conception. People who may never meet each other share essential notions of community identities and behaviour. Yasuko Kanno and Bonny Norton (2003, 241) argue similarly that ‘imagined communities’ refer to:

> [G]roups of people not immediately tangible and accessible with whom we connect through the power of the imagination. In our daily lives we interact with many communities whose existence
can be felt concretely... In imagining ourselves bonded with our fellow compatriots across space and time, we can feel a sense of community with people we have not yet met, but perhaps hope to meet one day.

Communities undoubtedly share common conceptions about identity belonging shaped and reshaped within the crucible of socio-cultural and historical context. Such commonalities of thinking are profoundly implicated within the materialities and structures of social relations. They shape, and are shaped within, the normative notions that define who-we-are and who-we-are-not. Said (1991) suggests that in a contemporary postcolonial context, the ‘West’ has the power to create its own reality, history, traditions of thought, imagery and vocabulary. In such an unequally empowered world, ‘the some’ define their identities through the conceptualisation of others. Dwyer (1997) describes contemporary Western society as a ‘white’ world in which narratives of whiteness set out the conceptual and material terms and conditions of who they are themselves through the ascription of the lives of those who are ‘not white’. In Australia, Hage’s (1998) posits this sense of community as defined by a particular kind of white, a ‘not-wogginess’.8

Produced in process within the vagaries of socio-cultural and historical context, such notions of ‘imagination’ are more than simply ‘imagined’ or mere matters of perception. More than binaries of black/white, colonial/colonised, they are negotiated within a socio-cultural and discoursal world that is complex, multifaceted and hybrid. They represent a terrain of imagination that is both notional and material in its conception and comprehensive and multilayered in its application. As Marion O’Callaghan (1995, 22) elucidates:

The selecting out and rearrangement of ‘facts’ in order to provide coherence, framework and seeming unity between ideas and action, or more precisely to provide a basis for the direction of social relationships and the social creation of categories. It is what is imagined that posits the ‘natural’, that is, the normal, the fixed and unchanging. Seeming to exist in a historical forever, this is nevertheless framed by the present. To put it in another way, imagination is socially created in what follows, not precedes, the structure of social relations.

Callaghan describes a postcolonial world, the terms and conditions of which are made through the particularities of multilayered and interrelated cultural and historical trajectories. It describes a ‘terrain of the imagination’, a totality of the taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world that provide the frame through which everyday practice and the negotiation of social conditions are made and take place. The formulation of the universe as it is known and practised is, nevertheless, socially created and remains firmly fixed in relation to its negotiation within the social world. It remains linked within the unpredictable process that interweaves the actions and ideas of identities and the ways of meaning and practice of which they are part. The ‘terrain of the imagination’ defines the ‘taken-for-granted’ ways things are known about and done in the world and links these contingent processes with their socio-historical and cultural context and with day-to-day experience and practice.9 It is, as Atvah Brah (1996) explains, a shifting, changing interrelation between concept and materiality played across patterned fields of power; a specific type of power relation, produced and exercised in and through a myriad of economic, political and cultural practices.

**Imagining community home-spaces**

I am proposing the notion of ‘community’ as a conceptual and material terrain mapped by ‘some’. Its focus, as Phil Cohen (1993)10 argues evocatively, is the warmth and comfort of
the hearth, safe within the centre of ‘home-spaces’. This is the nostalgic dream-place of childhood memories and settled old age; a place of Eden-like existence where everyone obeys the rules and knows their place. The object of these dreams, Cohen (1993, 5) points out, is not the warm, nostalgic comfort of the home but the always prescient threat of the ‘alien presence’ of the other. The irony contained within dreams of home-spaces is that the promise of safety they provide is a never-reached fantasy shadowed by the threatening presence of outsiders. The presence of strangers places nostalgic imaginings of home-space out of control. The most basic of actions and conceptions no longer happen as expected. The alien, the stranger, remains just beyond our gaze, ambivalent and not quite known. He or she constitutes – even disrupts – the safe, taken-for-granted communal maps we draw (Bauman 1997a, b).

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 the ways that people understand day-to-day experience, domains of policy and practice, and the most taken-for-granted concepts, including identity. Even the solid and durable sense of time-space becomes threatened as people travel ever faster, both virtually and in reality. The merely local of home-space becomes interwoven within the international and the global as the Internet, radios and television beam the world of the outside into our innermost home-spaces. In such multiple worlds, the home-spaces of some men and women become ever more complex and changing as they find themselves able to come and go within what seems a limitless space; to be, it seems, almost anyone. Others find their world shrink as it becomes even more difficult to move outside the location of the place-they-are-now.

In this postmodern world, the solidity of what was and is seems to fall apart. Strangers ‘gestate uncertainty’, ‘befog and eclipse the boundary lines which ought to be clearly seen’ (Bauman 1997b, 17). Whereas in earlier times, the stranger was clearly defined as different and as outside the community, now borders between inside and outside of the community seem to fall apart (Arber 2006, 8). The conception of who-we-are and who-they-are becomes increasingly difficult to define as the stranger moves inside and outside of communities, is part of the community and not part of the community at the same time. In a time of increasing confusion the borders between self and other fall apart altogether, even as some remain other and excluded as before. The recent conception of the ‘terrorist’ exemplifies the vision of another who is both frighteningly different and a danger to our innermost home-spaces. In such an ever-faster, ever-in-process world, the stranger is neither on the outside nor the inside; is neither another nor ourself.

In an increasingly globalised world, international students add new dimensions to the ambivalence that underpins the ways that community members define home-spaces. Discourses of commodification and desire (Kenway and Bullen 2003), postcolonialism (Rizvi 1996), neoliberalism (Singh 1998) and cosmopolitanism interrelate with older discourses of race, identity and difference to include identities within the community in new ways (Matthews 2002; Apple, Kenway, and Singh 2005). At a city school, a teacher is confused by his pride that all his students share a difference from an unspecified norm, even as he understands that some of his students can no longer be understood as ‘different’. His own place, as sharing the difference we all share, is underpinned by an understanding that in some way he is not different at all but absolutely part of the community. At a country school, international students come from the outside to bring exotic and often difficult difference into a seemingly homogenous school. Either way, international students remain an invited presence, brought into our home-spaces when they are profitable and their otherness is manageable.
Tropes of imagined communities

In Australia, the terms and conditions that define entry into home-spaces, and the terms and conditions of community belonging, have been negotiated by the contrastive tropes of monoculturalism and multiculturalism. These, Michael Singh (1998) importantly argues, have become ‘code words’ – a re-languaging of the conditions of who-we-are:

…used to give selective and exclusory meaning to notions such as national identity, national spirit, citizenship and social political values in order to discuss and justify efforts to marginalise Australians of Asian, indigenous and some other migrant backgrounds. (Singh 1998, 13)

Traditionally, the relationship between different races and cultures has been described as particular tropes: monoculturalism/multiculturalism. Monoculturalism, the belief in the superiority and singularity of Western white and patriarchal culture and, by extension, the centrality of these cultures, remains a focus within Western conservative thought13 and in Australia.14 Those who belong are understood to share a singular – and, in Australia, a decidedly Anglo-Australian and Christian – approach that may not be shared by those who do not belong. Multiculturalism, in its various guises, has traditionally been concerned with conceptions of ‘unity in diversity’.15 A recent policy statement, *Multicultural Australia: United in Diversity* – Updating the 1999 New Agenda for Multicultural Australia: Strategic Directions for 2003–2006 reaffirmed the government’s support for, but also its suspicion of, multiculturalism:

The freedom of all Australians to express and share their cultural values is dependent on their abiding by mutual civic obligations. All Australians are expected to have an abiding loyalty to Australia and its people, and to respect the basic structures and principles underwriting our democratic society. These are the constitution, Parliamentary democracy, freedom of speech and religion, English as the native language, the rule of law, acceptance and equality. (Commonwealth of Australia 2003)

In Australia, multiculturalism has come to be a top-down policy promulgated by the state and a crucial trope through which community definitions and relationships can be explained and understood.16 It is the key ‘national narrative of cohesion and unification’ where the language and cultural differences that define immigrant and established resident populations can be unified as a single project (Mitchell 2003, 391). It is an ambiguous discourse. Multiculturalism, Sneja Gunew (1994) argues, provides the language to mark out the boundaries that separate nation from that which is not nation. More than that, multiculturalism provides the limit for distinguishing between that which is intrinsic and that which is extrinsic to us:

The rationale for this procedure is precisely the underlying logic of classic deconstruction, which posits that the elements excluded in the analytical process are the conditions of its possibilities. Thus the exclusions or marginalisations of certain writings in fact frame the conditions of those other writings, which are included or endorsed by the analytical process. Framings always sustains and contains that which, by itself collapses forthwith. (Gunew 1994, 28)

By providing the frame, Gunew argues, multicultural conception and practice reconceptualise the borders between ‘usness’ and ‘themness’, margin and centre, within the Australian imagination. In this case, Australian writings define the conditions of other writings, and in doing so define the self. However, it is a formulation of self that is paradoxical and in process. It reflects the power of the ‘coloniser’, but also the disruption of his or her power so that ‘it collapses forthwith’. More than policy and practices that set out and give legitimacy to the
ways that Australians can belong and behave within an Australian community, conversations about monoculturalism and multiculturalism have come to be ‘code words’ to define the ways that these debates and activities can be understood or spoken about. Implicit within these discussions is a notional ‘us’ who defines the terms and conditions of belonging and not belonging within an Australian community. Gunew’s argument is that these conversations seem to include all (as Australian) even as it defines some as being more properly included as Australian than others.

In Australia, as elsewhere, public issues and concerns to do with difference and identity continue to be discussed in terms of multiculturalism and monoculturalism. Nevertheless, the ontological base of these tropes has changed as, in an increasingly globalised world, these conversations intersect with notions of cosmopolitanism. At its simplest, cosmopolitanism is what happens as the flow-on effect of market, financial and cultural interchange, as well as population movements, alter the definition of populations, the relationships within them and the ways these relationships are dealt with.

Szerszynski and Urry (2002, 370) describe cosmopolitanism as the condition within the modern world where some people have the ability to travel extensively, corporally and imaginatively and virtually. People have the capacity to consume en route, indulge their curiosity, take a risk, map out cultures and identities, and interpret and appreciate the world of others. For Lu (2000, 40), these global changes call for more complex definitions that follow a ‘universalistic morality that eschews parochial, especially national limitations or prejudices’. Like multiculturalism, she argues, cosmopolitan notions are contradictory, the individual difference of persons and groups understood in paradoxical relation to the common humanity of the many and ‘unable to account for deep difference’ (ibid., 257). Such changes to the ways notions of identity and community identity are spoken about must be understood at a interpersonal and at an institutional level, as well as in relation to the strategic imperatives of globalisation (Mitchell 2003, 268). The neoliberal agenda, with its focus on the reduction of public costs, market choice and accountability and the creation of ‘hierarchically conditioned, globally orientated state subjects’, means foci related to multicultural thought (cultural relativism, harmonious interchange, individual interchange and community solidarity) are no longer of immediate importance. Rather, ‘new strategic cosmopolitan’ has become the ‘foot-soldier’ for a renewed emphasis on national patriotism and international capitalism (ibid., 399). Schools have been part of this capitalist involvement within the globalisation process, and have had to increasingly market their product. This has been reflected in a reshaping of conversations about communities and identities as competition and accountability become crucial indicators of the academic enterprise.¹⁷

The contradictory terms and conditions that underpin the impact of international students into school communities demand the development of new discourses to describe community belonging. The ambivalence and confusions that have always underpinned discussions about multiculturalism and monoculturalism complicate the ways that critical research and pedagogy can be instituted within schools. More recent literatures of cosmopolitanism point to new directions for a critical response for policies and programs. A more complex and multi-layered view of cosmopolitanism accounts for the activities of individuals concerned with a modern world impacted upon by their changed ability to travel and to interact both virtually and materially. The lives of people in local communities across the globe are affected as demands of industry and capital interchange make new demands on labour, education and social behaviour. These altered conditions introduce new tensions and debates that transform conceptions of community relations, including debates about marketing, internationalisation, cultural interchange – but also about terrorism, refugees and illegal workers. For Beck (2002, 18), such understanding demands the additional perspective concerned with
...the dialogic imagination. By that I mean the clash of cultures and rationalities within one's own life, the internalised other. The dialogic imagination corresponds to the coexistence of rival ways of life in the individual experience which makes it a matter of fate to compete, reflect, criticise, understand, combine contradictory certainties.

This is to negate a ‘monologic imagination’ which excludes the otherness of the other’ (ibid, p.19) for a perspective and which includes the ‘otherness of the other’.

**Impacting imagined communities**

Discussions with school representatives about the impact of international students focused on the day-to-day activities concerned with introducing those students into the school: the financial costs and benefits of bringing students into the school, the process of marketing the program, the intercultural and international skills brought by international students and the human, curriculum and policy resources that schools needed to work with them. As participants within everyday school life, representatives explored these concepts as they are understood within a ‘terrain of imagination’, understood from the vantage-point of individual experience and practice.

My analysis of these conversations explored these from the different perspectives of the ontological understandings that mediated the shape and focus of the discussion. This exploration suggested that our discussions about the impact of the international students in schools were mediated by others which defined community identity and the ways that international students were included within it. In particular, they focused around tightly-held notions of identity and difference made in contrast to almost empty, though well-considered, notions of community. Tropes of multiculturalism and monoculturalism ascribed the identity of communities and the ways that individuals could belong and form relationships.

The paradox that underpins multiculturalism – whereby all are part of the community, even as they are made not quite part of the community – confounded the ways that this city community could define itself. Discussions of monoculturalism drew borders between community belonging more starkly as international students became representative of different and exotic cultural and social understandings that could be brought into the school from other multicultural and international spaces. At Kilnoon Secondary School, Willis’s local students caused confusion as they were Australian and not-quite-Australian, even when they had been in Australia for several generations. The international student seemed more clearly demarcated as different. Their designation as not-Australian was not in dispute. The trope ‘monoculturalism’, which Finch at Corrumba Secondary school draws on, sets out a binary between local and international students who bring ‘multicultural’ and other and different cultural and international skills into the school.

Not addressed by these two well-worn and oft-conflicting tropes was the way that these understandings intertwine with others, particularly those of locality, class, (gender), race, and commodification and globalisation. The exotic multicultural attributes brought by international students, sharply distinguished from the nebulous ‘monocultural’ nature of country school, were understood as already present in the city. Their classed difference in a lower-middle-class city school was demonstrated by their different aspirations, educational backgrounds and financial power. The tensions that exist within the binary multiculture/monoculture caused discomfort within the school community. Teachers and students required intercultural skills to work with international students and to include them within the schoolroom and playground. They were anxious about groups of international students who remained different and alienated from the main school body. International students in
the city were more easily accommodated, as teachers there were used to ‘difference’. In the country, the international student who was accepted overcame these social and cultural obstacles by avoiding the seclusion of the ESL room, neglecting his school work and joining in the extracurricular activities of the school.

The way in which difference was defined by the different discourses of race, ethnicity and community identity; commodification and neo-liberalism and redefined the ways that international students could belong and work within local educational communities. The notion that the program must ‘pay for itself’ and that ‘we’ must understand this, made the international student a particular kind of community member sought, not always willingly, by the other, and more legitimate members of the community of the school. Kenway and Bullen’s recent (2003) book, Consuming Children, explores how 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. The changed dialectic of derision and desire, as notions of commodification and neoliberal accounting, negotiate the already raced conceptions of community identity and cultural difference.

Fazal Rizvi’s argument (1996, 178), is that inconsistencies and exclusions underpin the convoluted, decentered, yet disturbingly material notion of the stereotype and the postcolonial 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’, sets 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. What is new are the ways these logics are reformulated as economically driven as the other person – the immigrant, the businessman, the international student – is constructed not only as raced but also as commodified.

The ontological context of today’s world, shaped within socio-historical context and global and technological change, provides a new, but by now normalised and taken-for-granted, circumstance that mediates modern thought, behaviour and argument. It is concerned with ‘a terrain of imagination’ entered into from the very different perspectives made available by individual experience, community debate and socio-cultural circumstance. The exploration of this terrain includes the interrogation of discussions of everyday practices as they are site and subject of unequally empowered conflicting, interrelated discourse. The investigation of discussions with teachers about the impact of international students in their school suggested that these discussions were intertwined with other notions concerned with the maintenance of educational ‘home-spaces’ and the costs and benefits of bringing racially and culturally different students into the school. These notions were impacted upon by systemic understandings drawn from debates about multiculturalism and monoculturalism and overlaid by newer concerns emergent from the cosmopolitan terms and conditions of a global age.

The insight of critical theory is that these conversations need to be made transparent, but also critiqued. Ulrich Beck’s (2002, 18) call for a ‘dialogic imagination’ negates the ‘monologic imagination’ through which community identity is defined simply through divergent multicultural/monocultural tropes. The paradoxical definitions that these tropes provide for discussions about identity and belonging become even more problematic as they take place within the shifting times and blurring boundaries of globalising change. The ambiguities that underpin earlier discussions nevertheless remain: the individual is both differentiated and implicated in various group identities, and undifferentiated in his common humanity. The veneer of commodifying discourses – where some other, the
international student, is a ‘benefit’ (or cost) for ‘our student’ and our community – is what needs to be analysed here.

This paper discusses research into the ways that school representatives spoke about the impact of international students coming into the school. The focus of the investigation was the ways in which international students worked within the school and the policies and curriculum measures put in place to deal with those students. Conversations about multiculturalism and monoculturalism, convergent with newer discourses of commodification, worked to reinforce the ‘monologic imagination’ of school representatives and define community identification and participation. Of concern is the way such words matter as international students and school representatives act and speak in a social world defined by culture and histories and formulated within the crucible of modernity: within the notional and material terms and conditions of risk, transience and uncertainty.18

To become more than tropes, arguments about community relations must be understood as complex and multilayered in their conception, accounting for the everyday of people’s lives; the debates and issues that come to represent these experiences and practices in our time; and the taken-for-granted conception that mediates their thinking and practice. A more critical view of community relationships, a ‘critical cosmopolitanism’, accounts for the contradictory uncertainties that define and manage others in contemporary spaces and times.19 This demands that we come to terms with the terrain of difficult and unequally empowered discourse formulated within the crucible of ambivalences and desire whereby ‘international’ students, peripheral to ‘our’ community, are much in demand for their profitability, cultural attributes and exoticism.

**In conclusion**

This paper suggests important directions for thinking about the ways that communities are defined and spoken about and the implications this has for understanding the impact of international students upon local school communities. Discussions about international students in what were government and community schools were considered and defined by the material and conceptual relations of identity and difference and criss-crossed by the politics of consumption and production.

The slippery notion that underpins notions of multiculturalism in a metropolitan school is that difference seems to disappear even as it reappears in complex and confused ways. The ambivalent logic which defines 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 monocultural school student was impacted upon by the increasingly dangerous presence of the international student, separated as he or she was by the lack of sameness exhibited, materially as well as conceptually, in the ESL room.

The success of the international student’s contribution to the finances of the school, and the politics of desire that underpinned the logic of this process of commodification, add a new logic to these conversations. Literatures about cosmopolitanism critically explore the ways that communities are understood and behave within an internationally and globalised context. These too are interrogated when we explore the tenuous belonging of international students in local schools.

**Notes**

1. Footnotes have been referenced by pseudonyms to maintain the anonymity of respondents.
2. Including Vice Principals, international student coordinators, English language teachers, class teachers.

3. This material is large and is still being added to. It is impossible to explore all of the examples and themes developed by the analysis within the limited space provided by this paper. These examples do provide real examples of experience and practice, and in this way add to our understanding of the ways that community and difference has been understood, particularly in relation to the presence of international students in Victorian state secondary schools.

4. These case studies have been taken from research in eight Victorian state secondary schools mentioned earlier: four rural and four urban. In line with notions expressed within ethnographic literatures, I am not suggesting that the scenarios discussed are true across all or most secondary schools within rural and urban Victoria (e.g., Denzin and Lincoln 1998). They do, however, describe patterns in the data that exemplify the point I am making here.

5. The data discussed here is taken from transcripts in my study. The names and descriptions of the schools and of the respondents have been changed so as to preserve their anonymity. At the same time, steps have been taken to preserve a sense of the kind of school and the essential integrity of the respondents represented.


7. See particularly Dwyer (1997); for discussions of ways this takes place in Australia, see for instance Hage (1998), Stratton (1998).

8. Hage’s concept of ‘not-wogginess’ takes from the Australian colloquialism ‘wog’, which is used, usually disparagingly, to describe ethnically different Australians and migrants.

9. This codification of the world as it is made and known and is caught in a formation of ‘linkage’ has been described by Hall and by Grossberg as ‘articulation’. For an in-depth discussion of articulation, see Grossberg (1992, 1996). For more details see Hall (1992, 1996, 1997).

10. For other discussions of these ideas, I consider the work of Chambers (1996) and Papastergiadis (1998).


12. For a discussion of the relation between this imposition of the outside into the centre of our very homes, and the enunciation and embodiment of relations between others and ourselves, see McCarthy (1998).


14. Various Australian policy statements have discussed these trends; see, for instance, Towards a National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia, Advisory Council on Multicultural Affairs (1988), 2; or, within academic textual discussion, see for instance Jupp (1996); Cahill (2001).

15. See, for example, most recently, Commonwealth of Australia (2003).


19. See, for example, Delany (2006); Beck (2002).

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