

Rurality, Diversity and Schooling

Multiculturalism in Regional Australia

Neroli Colvin

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*This book is dedicated to my parents and grandparents for their lifelong gifts
of curiosity, love of learning and educational opportunities.*

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Foreword

Megan Watkins and Greg Noble

In the Introduction to this insightful and timely book, Neroli Colvin recounts how, when conducting the research that informs it, she would often be asked what it was about, to which she would reply, 'cultural diversity in regional schools'. The standard response she received was, 'Is there any?' This, of course, is the general impression of not only regional schools but anywhere outside Australia's major cities. Cultural diversity is viewed as an urban phenomenon, while the rural is seen as the preserve of White Australians, often also neglecting the presence of Australia's Indigenous populations, the first inhabitants of the land. This book engages with these misconceptions as Colvin incisively examines the changing demographics and complex racial dynamics of the place she calls Easthaven, a regional town in New South Wales (NSW), Australia. With particular attention to its two state high schools, Seaview and Hillview, she interrogates how these schools, and their broader communities, navigate the increasing cultural complexity they are experiencing, foregrounding the influence of policies of multiculturalism at varying levels of government and bureaucracy on this process. While discussion of cultural diversity in Australia is generally concerned with migrant-derived diversity, the focus of multicultural policy, Colvin stresses how this is a very partial account, particularly in rural and regional areas. A study of the 'plural rural' in a settler-colonial nation like Australia, she argues, needs to first acknowledge its First Peoples and their status within this racial and cultural mix. Colvin's study of Easthaven, therefore, not only considers those who are recently arrived, such as the growing number of refugees from parts of Africa, South-east Asia and the Middle East – there by dint of government resettlement programmes – but their interrelations with the White *and* Indigenous populations of the town.

Colvin provides an empirically rich analysis of this diversifying landscape, combining policy analysis, interviews with various actors and observation both inside and outside the two schools. She has a particular interest, however, in language and multicultural discourse and the work they do in regulating values, attitudes and practices in relation to cultural diversity. Taking the relatively innocuous refrain 'Our diversity is great', she shows there is contention in terms of whether diversity *is* great in both number and value. In terms of number, Australia often boasts it is one of the most multicultural countries in the world, but this diversity is not evenly spread and so when it 'arrives' in rural contexts such as Easthaven, its impact is amplified, adding another level of complexity to the predominantly 'White' and, to varying degrees, 'Black' racial mix of such towns.

Colvin also closely scrutinizes the other sense of ‘great’, seen in terms of diversity’s value to the nation. Diversity as a ‘strength’ and diversity as an ‘asset’ are common descriptors within multicultural discourse and especially within multicultural education. Building on the work of various scholars, she demonstrates how this celebratory mode of multiculturalism tends to deflect attention away from a more challenging treatment of racism and forms of structural inequality, unhelpfully silencing any discomfit around cultural difference which she feels is the role of education to address. It is here that Colvin sees the real impact of her work, promoting dialogue around difference especially within educational contexts.

Throughout the book, there is mention of the practical application of its implications, but, sadly, Neroli will never see this. You will note a shift here in reference from Colvin, the author and scholar, to Neroli, our friend and colleague. We first met Neroli when she was the successful applicant for the PhD scholarship attached to *Rethinking Multiculturalism/Reassessing Multicultural Education*, an Australian Research Council project that we led in collaboration with Professor Kevin Dunn at Western Sydney University, the NSW Department of Education and the then NSW Institute of Teachers. We supervised Neroli’s doctorate, together with Associate Professor Tania Ferfolja, which was an easy task. As a former print journalist, Neroli was not only a keen investigator and researcher, adept at interviewing and sourcing information, but a beautiful writer. Over the course of her candidature, as she developed into a gifted scholar, so too did the disease that had plagued her all her life. Ever the fighter, Neroli was determined to finish her doctorate, but passed away the year after she graduated. This book, based on her doctorate, is an important pillar of her legacy. While she managed to publish two journal articles and some online material, the book was simply too much to consider in her remaining months. What is produced here is Neroli’s work, but with some minor editing and updated references. We also want to acknowledge Neroli’s publications and thank the publishers for permission to reproduce sections from each of these:

Colvin, N. (2013). Resettlement as rebirth: How effective are the midwives? *M/C Journal*, 16(5). Retrieved from <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/viewArticle/706>

Colvin, N. (2017). “Really really different different”: Rurality, regional schools and refugees. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 20(2), 225–39.

We are ever grateful to Bloomsbury, and Ally Baker in particular, for supporting the book’s publication. There are also many others who assisted with this project: Ivy Vuong, Barbara Pini, Farida Fozdar and Rose Butler. Most of all, thanks to Jock Cheetham, Neroli’s partner – who continues the good work through the Neroli Colvin Storytelling Foundation – and to her parents, Lorraine and Barry. This wouldn’t have been possible without your love, support and ongoing commitment to Neroli’s legacy.

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Preface – A Word on Words

Australia is home to the world's oldest continuous living cultures. It is home to a large population of people whose forebears came from the other side of the globe – from England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales. And it is home to millions of people with ethnic and cultural origins elsewhere on the planet, many of whom have arrived in the past seventy years.

Culturally and linguistically, Australia remains strongly linked to that cluster of small islands in the North Atlantic Ocean, the British Isles. Geographically, it is perched on the edge of Asia. Socially, it was born, and has been built, on ideals such as fairness, egalitarianism and secularism. All of these facets of Australia – historical, demographic, cultural, linguistic, geographic, social, economic, political – are important to the work that is this book and are explored in the pages that follow.

Above all, language – both 'official' (as, for example, in national policies) and everyday – is a central concern. As Goldberg (2006) notes:

Languages embed sets of beliefs, collective understandings and experiences, institutional expressions. They reflect and shape prevailing sociocultural and institutionalizing narratives, overriding, even overdetermining, though not necessarily totalizing or even finalizing accounts of historical memory, social arrangement, how things are and are to be done. Languages, in short, entwine the descriptive with the normative in social life. (p. 358)

That words both describe and produce is foundational to this book, and it is for this reason I explain here, at the outset, usage conventions adopted in the writing.

Key Terms in This Book

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Indigenous

In everyday usage in Australia, the adjectival terms 'Aboriginal', 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' and 'Indigenous' are often used interchangeably. Technically, 'Indigenous' is the broader term, encompassing both 'Aboriginal' and 'Torres Strait Islander' peoples – peoples who had distinctive ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, but who today are 'united' in the fact that they pre-dated European settlement of the lands now known as Australia. However, the terms are contested and usage is inconsistent, in academic as well as popular domains (Jamieson, 2012; Paradies, 2006).

Preferences among Australians who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander are similarly mixed, with some favouring kinship or language-group identifications, or regional identifications such as Koori or Murri (Shaw et al., 2006), or sometimes terms with global currency such as ‘First Peoples’, ‘First Nations’ or ‘Black’. In short, usage is heavily contingent on geographical location, institutional setting and social or political context. A person may describe themselves as ‘an Indigenous Australian’ to a European-background Australian, for example, but as ‘a Warlpiri person’ to other people who identify as Indigenous. Other people of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent eschew ‘Indigenous’ as scientific and colonial (Jamieson, 2012).

In this book, I use ‘Indigenous’ and ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander’ interchangeably for national contexts. For New South Wales (NSW), I use ‘Aboriginal’, the term typically used in state policy documents (Wilson, 2016), including Department of Education (NSW DoE) policies and programmes (NSW DoE, 2016a). While I make this distinction in my own writing, others whose work or words I cite do not necessarily use the terms in the same way.

I use ‘peoples’ (plural) to emphasize the heterogeneity of Indigenous ancestries, knowledges, perspectives and cultural practices.

Anglo, Anglo-Australian

The term ‘Anglo-Australian’ (sometimes shortened to ‘Anglo’) is widely used to describe people with English ancestry in Australia. However, the term is also used to refer to people of Anglo-Celtic descent – that is, whose forebears came to Australia from Ireland, Scotland and/or Wales as well as England (DSS, 2014). It is the latter, broader sense in which ‘Anglo-Australian’ is used in this book.

Backgrounds Other Than Indigenous and Anglo

The millions of non-British immigrants to Australia have been referred to by many terms over the decades, including ‘New Australians’ and ‘ethnics’, and more specific identifiers such as ‘Chinese’ or ‘African’. In view of the arguments this book makes about diversity and inclusion, I use terminology such as ‘Chinese-background’, ‘African-background’ and so on to emphasize that people’s cultural and/or ethnic origins are not necessarily salient in their present identities and everyday lives. Again, others whose work or words I cite may not follow the same convention.

Language Background

Since the 1970s (albeit to different degrees), Australian multiculturalism has promoted cultural maintenance, including maintenance of community languages and dialects, within the context of a nation united by the common language of English (DSS, 2007). Over the decades, various descriptors and acronyms have been used to refer to people whose first language is not English. These include ‘NES’/‘NESB’ (non-English-speaking background); ‘ESL’ (English as a second language) and its more contemporary version, ‘EAL/D’ (English as an additional language or dialect); ‘LBOTE’ (language background

other than English) and the related 'LOTE' (language/s other than English); and the broader 'CALD' (culturally and linguistically diverse). Within NSW schools, EAL/D and LBOTE are the current terms for student cohorts (NSW DoE, 2014); CALD is typically favoured in more general contexts. Although NESB and ESL are 'older' terms and have largely been displaced in official documents by, respectively, CALD/LBOTE and EAL/D (Dobinson & Buchori, 2016; Inglis, 2009), all terms are still in wide circulation.

As well as featuring in policies and political discourses, all of the terms above – and contestations about them – are prominent in educational contexts: student data (categorization and counting processes); curriculum priorities and perspectives, such as the cross-curriculum priority of 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures' in the national curriculum (ACARA, 2016a); school classifications and funding; within-school allocation of resources, and so on. Schools in particular play a crucial role in our socialization into groups that are larger than our family and immediate community; in how we identify with and are identified within diverse groups; and in shaping how we perceive and interpret the physical and social worlds in which we live, learn and work. To return to Goldberg (2006), language is crucial to the notions and narratives of 'difference' that govern our every thought, experience and action. The key issue is not difference per se, but concerns questions about 'who defines difference, how different categories. . . are represented within the discourses of 'difference', and whether 'difference' differentiates laterally or hierarchically' (Brah, 1991, p. 71). In short, much is at stake with terminology, given language produces as well as reflects, enables as well as constrains, our positionalities and possibilities.

Acknowledgements

I am so grateful to finally be writing these acknowledgements, and there are many people to thank.

I would like to acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the first inhabitants of Australia, and the traditional custodians of the lands where we all live, learn and work.

I would like to thank the principals of the studied schools for agreeing to participate in this project. This book would not have been possible without their interest, trust and cooperation, and without the generosity of all of the research participants. Special thanks must go to the schools' EAL/D teachers, who were particularly helpful in inviting me to events, giving me access to materials and sharing their insights and experiences.

I am immensely grateful to Professor Megan Watkins, Professor Greg Noble and Associate Professor Tania Ferfolja for their continual guidance and copious reading. Megan and Greg and the *Rethinking Multiculturalism/Reassessing Multicultural Education* research team gave me the opportunity to be involved in their project, from which I have learnt an enormous amount. The financial assistance from the Australian Research Council and Western Sydney University has also been greatly appreciated.

Many other academics have provided inspiration, personal encouragement and useful feedback along the way. Some appear in the references, while some do not, but thank you all.

My heartfelt thanks, too, to the friends who have provided reading, proofing, transcription, listening and general sanity services, including Susan, Aylin, Reuben, John, Louise, Mary, Eve and Anna.

To my parents, Barry and Lorraine and other family members, thank you for your constant interest and caring.

Finally, my gratitude to Jock for giving me the space to do this. Without your patience, love and all-round support, I would never have made it.

Abbreviations

ABC	Australian Broadcasting Corporation
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACARA	Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority
AEC	Australian Electoral Commission
AEO	Aboriginal Education Officer
AHRC	Australian Human Rights Commission
AIATSIS	Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
ANZAC	Australian and New Zealand Army Corps
ATSIC	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (federal, 1990–2005)
BOSTES	Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards (NSW)
CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CLS	Critical Legal Studies
CRT	Critical Race Theory
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (federal)
DHA	Department of Home Affairs (federal)
DIBP	Department of Immigration and Border Protection (federal)
DIMIA	Department of Immigration, Multicultural Affairs and Indigenous Affairs (federal, 2001–6)
DPMC	Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet
DSS	Department of Social Services (federal)
EAL/D	English as an Additional Language or Dialect
ESL	English as a Second Language
FECCA	Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia
HSC	Higher School Certificate (NSW)
ICSEA	Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage
IEC	Intensive English Centre
LBOTE	Language Background Other Than English

LOTE	Language/s Other Than English
MCEETYA	Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs
MSC	Mapping Social Cohesion (Scanlon Foundation surveys)
NAIDOC	National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy
NES/NESB	Non-English-Speaking Background
NMAC	National Multicultural Advisory Council
NSW	New South Wales
NSW DoE	Department of Education (NSW)
NT	Northern Territory
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
P&C	Parents and Citizens
PBL	Positive Behaviour for Learning
PLP	Personalized Learning Plan
RMRME	Rethinking Multiculturalism/Reassessing Multicultural Education
SA	South Australia
SBS	Special Broadcasting Service
SRC	Student Representative Council
STARTTS	Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (NSW)
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
TESOL	Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
WA	Western Australia
WASP	White Anglo-Saxon Protestant

Introduction

Rurality, Diversity and Schooling

It's Multicultural Day at Seaview High,¹ a government high school in a coastal town in New South Wales (NSW), Australia. A recent addition to the school's calendar (this is only the third year it has been held), the event has become a feature of Seaview's expanding multicultural education agenda.

The day (in reality, an afternoon) is designed for Year 8 students and involves their participation in a range of activities: fan painting, tai chi, salsa, Aboriginal ceramics, Burmese dancing, African drumming and French cooking. Spreadsheets listing the time and place for each activity have been pinned up in the corridors, and students were asked to write their names down for two of the classes on offer.

First up it's Burmese dancing. About thirty students – most of them blond; some tanned, some fair-skinned; all in school uniform – stand around a space in the centre of the room, while two black-haired, brown-skinned girls dressed in ethnic Burmese clothing hover at one side.

As more students straggle into the room ('I was told to come here'; 'the other activities are full'), a tape recorder is produced and a teacher signals that the two girls should begin dancing.

They perform their dance. The students watching clap politely. The teacher remarks: 'It looks as if you were doing something in the fields – threshing, maybe?' The dancers don't understand the question – or perhaps the word 'threshing' – or don't have the language or confidence to explain the meaning of their actions. The question hangs in the air.

The teacher asks for volunteers to join the dancers in the centre of the room. No one moves.

'Come on,' she says, urging several students to copy the dancers' movements.

The teacher is enthusiastic and encouraging, while the students feel awkward and self-conscious. The dancers themselves seem more comfortable, however, relaxing into their performance and enjoying their role as leaders.

Down the corridor, students have gathered for African drumming. There's no teacher; instead, a Year 11 student of African background appears to be in charge. She, too, is wearing colourful traditional clothing and has bright flowers in her hair. The students are shouting and randomly slapping their *djembe* (drums). The older student struggles to be heard, let alone to lead the Year 8s in group practice.

Things are much quieter in the Aboriginal ceramics class. The students have almost finished painting various designs – mostly dot patterns and stylized native animals – on mugs and plates. The art teacher checks their progress, asks them about their designs and explains how he'll fire the pieces in the kiln.

Lois, a head teacher and member of the school executive, later explains that Seaview High is 'going through a great change'. It used to be very much a 'monoculture', she says, but now it's 'physically looking different with all our African and Middle Eastern students'. She thinks multicultural events are often 'just top-dressing stuff' – promoting a view that 'I know about a specific culture because I've seen the national dress and I can recognize their flag and I know they eat this' – but adds: 'Well, it's a start. . . . At least [we're] doing something. . . . We had nothing before.'

* * *

Celebrating Our Diversity

Multicultural Day at Seaview High will be familiar to most people involved with Australian schools. In recent decades multicultural events, along with international exchange programmes, have become popular additions to school calendars and curricula across the country (Watkins & Noble, 2019). They are a common way in which schools recognize and celebrate Australia's status as one of the most culturally diverse nations in the world (ABS, 2013b) – a characteristic that has become central to Australian identity, both within and beyond the nation's borders (DSS, 2011). Exhorted and exalted by a raft of policies, this diversity is recognized and celebrated each year through national events such as Harmony Day, Refugee Week and NAIDOC Week,² as well as specific cultural and regional festivals. All these events and programmes reveal something of how cultural diversity and multiculturalism (as the official policy response to diversity in Australia) are understood, valued and lived by individuals and groups within communities.

Multicultural Day at Seaview High is presented here as a window on how cultural diversity and multiculturalism are conceptualized and enacted in one particular setting – in this case, a public high school in a regional town which, like many other regional towns across Australia, has undergone significant demographic change over the past two decades. Of central interest to this book is how multicultural policies' promotion of diversity and its merits is refracted through rural imaginaries, identities and materialities to shape these localized conceptualizations and enactments.

Cultural Diversity in Rural Schools – Is There Any?

'Cultural diversity' and 'regional town' are terms that are not commonly thought of together. In writing this book, when people inquired what it was about and I gave them the five-word answer – 'cultural diversity in regional schools' – the main response was along the lines of: 'Is there any?' As Hugo (2000) has noted, there are many myths

about non-metropolitan Australia – one of them being that it remains untouched by the flows of people that have transformed the nation's major cities post the Second World War. The diversity in regional towns, more typically, has been a matter of 'White' and 'Black':³ the Anglo-Australian majority and the Indigenous Australian minority.⁴ But as Hugo (2000) writes:

The 37.3 percent of Australians living outside of cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants are changing in substantial and important ways under the influence of economic, social, political and environmental changes. . . . [W]hile the dynamics of population change in the metropolitan sector are well known, that occurring in non-metropolitan Australia has not been analysed to the same extent. ('Introduction' section)

At its most basic level, this book aims to reduce this gap in the literature by documenting the significant changes that have occurred in one regional town, and how the town and its public high schools – Seaview High, already introduced, and Hillview High, the town's other public high school – have responded to those changes. The lens applied to this analysis is Australia's multicultural policies: in other words, how do multicultural policies 'hit the ground' (Jakubowicz & Ho, 2013b) in non-metropolitan areas – areas where cultural diversity has not been a part of most longtime residents' lived experience, and is usually not part of community identities?

In answering this question, the book takes up policies as texts that affect discursive and other social practices and thus have material *effects* (Fairclough, 2003) – thereby extending its purpose beyond simply documenting (school) community changes and responses to critically examining situated policy outcomes. Understanding the 'social, political, cognitive, moral and material consequences and effects' of texts is 'vital . . . if we are to raise moral and political questions about contemporary societies' (Fairclough, 2003, p. 14). Two such questions are at the core of this book. First, after De Lepervanche (1980), why is cultural diversity today promoted and celebrated by Australia and many Australians, when only a couple of generations ago it was officially obstructed and popularly opposed? And second, after Bell (1979),⁵ why, after more than four decades of multicultural policies and anti-discrimination laws,⁶ are racialized discourses and discriminatory practices still so evident in Australia? A third question then arises as to the relationship between these two – namely, how might the change in orientation towards diversity relate to the persistence of racialization and racism, or rather racisms (Amin, 2010; Forrest & Dunn, 2013)? Or, to put it slightly differently, to what extent might the contemporary emphasis on promoting and celebrating diversity, and particularly in schools and school communities, *enable* continued social inequalities?

The answers to these questions overlap to an extent, but a common starting point can be found in the observation that only *some* cultural differences are celebrated (Ang, Brand, Noble, & Sternberg, 2006; Cowlshaw, 2004a). In so-called 'settler societies',⁷ such as Australia, the process of decolonization is slow, halting and uneven, with remnant discourses of colonialism such as White superiority, segregation and assimilation competing with more 'modern' discourses such as equality, inclusion, recognition and Indigenous sovereignty (Curthoys, 2000). The primacy of the latter, more recent

discourses cannot and should not be assumed – especially in non-metropolitan areas where settler histories and colonial narratives have a continuing salience in both national and local imaginaries (Edgeworth, 2014; Jordan, Krivokapic-Skoko, & Collins, 2009). Nor should it be assumed that the latter discourses are antithetical, and remedial, to the former. Rather, attention must be paid to tensions within and between discourses and to the ‘situated and relational nature’ of people’s understandings, attitudes and practices with regard to diversity (Valentine & Sadgrove, 2014, p. 1982). These tasks are critical to illuminating the complex and often contradictory ways in which official multicultural discourses are taken up – echoed, appropriated, challenged, resisted – in different physical, social and institutional spaces.

Drawing on observational, interview and documentary data, this book explores four key themes, set out and illustrated here with reference to the opening account of Multicultural Day at Seaview High. First, the event reveals that ‘cultural diversity’, while seemingly a reasonably straightforward term, is in fact understood and used in varied and potentially problematic ways. For a ‘commonsense’ meaning of ‘cultural diversity’, one might turn to the Oxford Dictionaries (2016) and find the following: ‘The existence of a variety of cultural or ethnic groups within a society’ – with ‘culture’ defined as the beliefs, customs and social behaviours of a group, and ‘ethnicity’ as belonging to a group with common national or cultural origins. Similarly, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) defines cultural diversity as ‘the variety of languages, religions, ancestries and birthplaces reported by Australians’ in population studies such as the Census (ABS, 2012b, para. 1). With their emphasis on ‘variety’, these definitions imply that national, cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious categories such as ‘Australian’, ‘French’, ‘Aboriginal’, ‘Mandarin-speaking’ and ‘Muslim’ delineate equivalent dimensions of diversity and equivalent ‘groups’ of people. At Seaview High’s Multicultural Day, however, a subtly but powerfully different conceptualization of diversity is implicit in the focus on the performance of selected cultural practices of selected ‘other’ cultural or ethnic groups – that is, cultures or ethnicities other than the Anglo-Australian norm. The Anglo-Australian students are the spectators, the other-than-Anglos the ‘spectacle’. In short, the choice of activities and performers communicates that ‘diversity’ pertains to, and only to, ethnic minorities. Contrary to its dictionary definition, then, the term may not, in practice, encompass everyone.

Related to this is the issue of how Indigeneity and ‘Indigenous culture’ are positioned and represented in multicultural Australia. At Seaview High, ‘Aboriginal’ is just one of the array of (non-Anglo) ‘cultures’ students can learn about during Multicultural Day – in this case, through applying designs that are assumed to be ubiquitous in ‘Aboriginal art’ to (non-Indigenous) objects such as mass-produced ceramic mugs. Symbolically, the (hi)stories and practices of Australia’s original inhabitants are elided with the (hi)stories and practices of the country’s newest settlers to produce cultural diversity as an art form in itself: a ‘tapestry’ (Turnbull quoted in Davey, 2017) or ‘mosaic’ of myriad discrete, internally homogenous and more-or-less equal ‘cultures’. One effect of this elision is to mute still-unresolved but crucial questions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ right to be recognized as Australia’s first peoples, including in Australia’s founding document, the Constitution (AHRC, n.d.-a). The poet and

political activist Oodgeroo Noonuccal⁸ put it bluntly in 1988, the bicentenary of European settlement of Australia, when she said:

It must be clearly understood that the Aboriginal nation, yet to be recognized, has little or no enthusiasm for the so-called multicultural society of Australia, for it is unbelievable and a great indictment of European Australians that the Aboriginal people still find themselves . . . at the bottom of the socio-economic scale with regard to multiculturalism. (cited in Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2008, p. 47)

Such sentiments, and the allusion to racialized power structures and long-standing inequalities ('bottom of the . . . scale'), sit awkwardly with the explicitly positive orientation towards diversity of Australian multicultural policies. The current national policy, set out in a 2011 document entitled *The People of Australia*, begins by stating that 'Australia's multicultural composition is at the heart of our national identity and is intrinsic to our history and character' (DSS, 2011, p. 2). Multiculturalism, the policy continues, 'is in Australia's national interest and speaks to fairness and inclusion. . . . [It] is about all Australians and for all Australians' (p. 2). Similarly, the state-level Multicultural NSW Act 2000 begins:

This Act:

- a) promotes the equal rights and responsibilities of all the people of New South Wales within a cohesive and multicultural society in which:
 - i individuals share a commitment to New South Wales and to Australia, and
 - ii *diversity is regarded as a strength and an asset*, and
 - iii English is the common language, and
- b) recognises and values the different linguistic, religious and ancestral backgrounds of the people of New South Wales. (NSW Government, 2015, p. 2; emphasis added)

Here we see diversity framed *as* something – as 'a strength and an asset' – rather than merely noted as a 'fact' or characteristic of contemporary Australian society. It is this framing that is frequently echoed in official rhetoric about diversity. In 2016, the then prime minister Malcom Turnbull, for instance, declared that 'the richness of [Australia's] diversity is one of [Australia's] greatest strengths' (Turnbull, quoted in Perkins, 2016), while the theme of Harmony Day⁹ in 2016 was 'Our diversity is our strength'. Further, there is an implicit directive to institutions in multicultural policies including the Multicultural NSW Act 2000 (made explicit in Section 3, which sets out six multicultural principles) to recognize the varied backgrounds of Australians as a 'valuable resource' (principle 3(f)). Linguistic, religious and cultural differences are seen as no impediment to harmony and social cohesion – despite, for instance, the concerns voiced above by Noonuccal. This raises the question: What happens if differences *do* cause discomfort and division? What space and language are available to discuss tensions that are not supposed to exist?

Flowing from this is a third theme: the role of schools and other educational institutions in twenty-first-century Australia. Historically, schools have played a crucial part in maintaining the political, economic, social and cultural status quo in Western societies (Banks, 2011; Connell, 2011). More recently, however, schools have been reimagined as sites of innovation and transformation, and essential in preparing young people to live, work and compete in a globalizing world (Leonardo, 2002; Education Council (Australia), 2019). Thus, in addition to inculcating the traditional skills of literacy and numeracy, Australian teachers are now tasked with developing in their students technological competency, ‘critical and creative thinking’ and ‘intercultural understanding’ (ACARA, 2016b) – this last involving students learning to ‘value their own cultures, languages and beliefs, and those of others’ (ACARA, n.d.). Schools, then, have been, and are, both agents of and obstacles to change (Edgeworth, 2011, p. 14) – and Multicultural Day at Seaview High illuminates this tension in shifting conceptualizations of schools’ function. The event was introduced – in the face of some resistance from students and staff – in response to the resettlement of hundreds of refugees from Africa, South-east Asia and the Middle East in the region from the early 2000s on. Notwithstanding these recent demographic changes, blond hair, fair or freckled skin and ‘Aussie accents’ are still very much the norm.

Within this context, Multicultural Day is presented in Seaview High newsletters and reports as a forum for ‘raising awareness’ of the families from new and emerging communities in the region, as an opportunity for the school’s students from language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE¹⁰) to ‘celebrate their cultural heritage’ and as of benefit to ‘all students’ in drawing their gaze beyond their provincial town to the ‘global’. However, the focus on performance rather than engagement, on action rather than analysis, raises critical questions about how ‘culture’ and ‘difference’ are understood, represented and valued at Seaview High, and about the event’s potential and likely impacts as opposed to the stated intentions. As Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) note:

Current practical demonstrations of multicultural education in schools often reduce it to trivial examples and artifacts of cultures such as eating ethnic or cultural foods, singing songs or dancing, reading folktales, and other less than scholarly pursuits of the fundamentally different conceptions of knowledge or quests for social justice. (p. 61)

Certainly Multicultural Day at Seaview High was a ‘less than scholarly’ event and one that did not try to touch on epistemological or social justice issues. I do not suggest that the day was the extent of the school’s efforts to educate about, and for, diversity; it was not. Nor does this book intend a simple critique of such events; much has already been written and said, in academic and media spaces, along these lines (Nieto, 1995; Phillips, 2004; Troyna & Williams, 2012; Watkins & Noble, 2019) – including Kalantzis and Cope’s (1981) criticism more than four decades ago of the ‘spaghetti and polka’ approach to multicultural education prevalent in Australian schools. Rather, the intent is to unpack the sorts of understandings of ‘culture’ and ‘difference’ that continue to inform diversity initiatives, and to trace and explain the broader implications and

impacts of these understandings. Critical to this endeavour is paying close attention to discourses around diversity, both official and everyday, and to the space and time in which they occur – space and time, like language, being socially constructed (Fairclough, 2003).

If space is socially constructed, it is equally true that the social is spatially constructed – ‘and that fact – the spatial organization of society – makes a difference to how it [society] works’ (D. Massey, 1992, p. 70). Hence a fourth theme of this book is the ways in which the regional setting of Seaview and Hillview high schools shape how multiculturalism is understood, valued and lived at the schools. Pertinent here are not only the ‘microcultures of place’ (Amin, 2002, p. 967) – local demographic, social, political and economic histories, local geographies, local institutions, local resources and so on – but how the ‘rural’ itself is imagined and experienced (especially vis-à-vis the ‘urban’), and the centrality of the rural in national narratives (Garland & Chakraborti, 2006). Against prevailing urban-as-multicultural/rural-as-monocultural constructions (Askins, 2009; R. Butler, 2021; Farrugia, Smyth, & Harrison, 2016), these are issues that have received scant research attention. On the whole, urban settlements *are* more culturally diverse than rural ones (Jupp & Clyne, 2010) – and both the assumption and the reality of this have meant that popular and academic interest in multiculturalism has focused overwhelmingly on cities (Colvin, 2017). R. Butler (2020), for example, highlights the paucity of research on cultural diversity and immigrant experiences in regional Australia, while Duffy (2009) notes the urban bias in racism work, both in Australia and elsewhere, and the limited Australian literature on the processes of racialization in non-metropolitan spaces. At the same time, a growing body of work indicates that racialization and racial discrimination are significant problems in many rural communities (Malcolm, 2004; Pini & Bhopal, 2017). As Hugo (2008) observes:

Issues remain . . . about the injection of new elements of diversity into regional communities which have not previously been multicultural. . . . [T]he bulk of our understanding of immigrant settlement in and adjustment to Australia is based on metropolitan-based research, and there is an urgent need to better understand regional migration and settlement processes and impacts. (pp. 568, 569)

Part of the ‘urgent need’ identified by Hugo stems from the fact that for the past twenty years, Australian migration programmes have channelled increasing numbers of immigrants, including humanitarian entrants, into non-metropolitan areas (R. Butler, 2020; Krivokapic-Skoko & Collins, 2014). This trend occurs in other developed countries as well, usually reflecting governments’ desire to relieve immigration pressures on major cities while at the same time enhancing the economic and social viability of smaller centres (Boese, 2010; Duffy-Jones, 2014; Hugo & Morén-Alegret, 2008). The trend is important for several reasons, including that while immigrant flows to regional areas may still be weak compared with urban flows, their *relative* impact on receiving communities (and, in the context of this study, school communities) may be strong; and, relatedly, that the settlement and integration experiences of migrants in rural areas may be quite different to those of

migrants who settle in cities (De Finney, 2010; Edgeworth, 2014). Further, migrants' settlement and integration experiences may vary markedly depending (among other factors) on their particular ethnic, cultural, linguistic and/or religious background (Malcolm, 2004). This is true in urban contexts as well, but may be more pronounced in rural spaces given common conceptualizations of them as mostly monocultural (i.e. White).

In regions where cultural diversity has been more something seen on the nightly news than encountered in daily life, changing demographics are bringing opportunities and challenges that remain only partially acknowledged and explored. This gap is where this book makes its main contributions, in particular with regard to three interconnected areas. First, the challenges associated with increasing regional diversity cannot be assumed to be simply less intense versions of the challenges in urban locales (Colvin, 2013, 2017; Hugo & Morén-Alegret, 2008). Second, neither are the challenges simply reducible to lack of lived experience of diversity. Rather, this book contends, they are embedded in social constructions that naturalize both 'Angloness' (or 'Whiteness') and the 'rural' – both unbounded and dependent, respectively, on ethnic 'others' and urban settlements for their definition (Dwyer & Jones, 2000; Forrest & Dunn, 2013). The imagined affinity between Whiteness and rurality, colours and complexifies identity and belonging in non-metropolitan spaces in unique ways. Finally, the book contributes to the 'uneasy conversation' (Curthoys, 2000) about Australian multiculturalism and how it relates to, or should relate to, the past, present and future of Indigenous Australians. As noted, decolonization, like diversification, is uneven in Australia, and the nation's settler-society history has major implications for multicultural policy and practice – yet this is rarely recognized, let alone discussed. In schools, as in other spheres (policy, administration, academe), Aboriginal perspectives and programmes are typically separated from multicultural perspectives and programmes. But as population flows change, new and old settlement issues are coming face to face in regional areas in ways they seldom do in Australia's big cities, illuminating theoretical and practical tensions routinely glossed over by 'diversity-is-strength' discourses.

Discourse and Other Tools

This book examines how difference and diversity are perceived and experienced by people in particular institutional and geographical spaces – here, high schools in a regional town. A starting point for this task is recognizing that cultural, ethnic and racial categories such as 'Australian', 'Burmese' and 'Black' – along with spatial categories such as 'rural' and 'urban' – are socially constructed. It is not enough, however, to say that categories are socially constructed. Questions must be asked about who 'constructs' and who is 'constructed', and how; and what names and namings, and the narratives in which names are embedded, *do* in people's daily lives. As Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) write, within any world view 'some forms of action become natural, others unthinkable' (p. 60). Different understandings of the world – reflected in and