“But we’re not a multicultural school!”: Locating intercultural relations and reimagining intercultural education as an act of ‘coming-to-terms-with our routes’

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Learning to live in a superdiverse world may be heralded as one of the great social challenges of our time. A challenge in which education can play a role addressing. In the last decade, intercultural education has been posed as one way to foster so-called ‘desirable’ attributes in young people that can contribute towards the development of socially cohesive societies. Many nation states that have adopted intercultural education in some form or another are not only working to find ways to accommodate increased cultural diversity in teaching and learning programs, but also the diverse circumstances that people crossing borders carry and how these intersect in local settings.

Modern Australia is an immigration nation. As such, intercultural education, or developing intercultural understanding as it is framed in official Australian policy and curriculum, is a priority. Such a priority, in fact, that in Victoria it has been elevated to an assessed component of the formal curriculum. Despite official policy and curriculum levers directing teachers to do this work, actually enacting teaching and learning programs and practices that facilitate intercultural understanding in meaningful ways requires engaging in complex identity work.

This paper reports on an ethnographic study that examined the way local school spaces shape opportunities for teachers’ to do intercultural work. Set in one school over a six-month period, this study examined the disjuncture between official policy directives of intercultural education and actual policy enactment on the ground in the school. Set in a predominantly ‘white’ school, this study argues that intercultural work is less about learning about diverse cultural others—as it is often positioned by ad hoc programs and events that celebrate multiculturalism—but rather an opportunity to traverse the complex spaces in-between cultures in a kind of ‘coming-to-terms with our routes’. This study found that both the opportunities and challenges of developing intercultural understanding in Australian schools lay in ‘coming-to-terms-with’ the intersecting tensions between diverse cultural identities and representations, the nation building role of schooling, and local discourses of cultural differences. Using the work of Lefebvre, this study examines the rhythms of local spatial relations at one school and how these shape the conditions that produce particular kinds of intercultural relations. In doing so, this paper complicates the neatly packaged aspiration of the intercultural curricular framework to consider how intercultural education might be located and reimagined beyond a celebration of diverse cultural others.