

Superdiversity as a human condition: Why ‘superdiversity’ in education today?

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The image of ‘the world in a school’ (Kostogriz & Doেকে, 2011) presents a major problem for education systems that aspire to meet the unique needs of all students and improve school participation and well-being. There is a rapidly changing demographic configuration of urban and rural populations due to the mass movement of people from varied cultural, linguistic, socio-economic and religious backgrounds, as well as increasing recognition of differences in ability, gender and sexuality. The increased diversification of society – its speed, intensity and complexity – has been signified by the term ‘superdiversity’ to signal ‘a level and kind of complexity surpassing anything previously experienced in a particular society’ (Vertovec, 2007, p. 1049).

Diversity has been traditionally associated with urban contexts of schooling, and the concept of ‘superdiversity’ traditionally considered linguistic and cultural diversity in formerly monoglossic contexts (Mendoza, 2020). A broadening of the concept of ‘superdiversity’ challenges the binary distinction between urban and rural school settings and binary coding more broadly when considering diversity in education. The superdiversity of the student population in Australian schools now represents a plenitude of cultural-linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds, living conditions, lifestyles, abilities, identifications and their intersectionality. Superdiversity can now encompass a wider range of diversities than its original conceptualization by Vertovec (2007).

Despite significant progress and improved policies in schools, most countries still struggle to address the needs of diverse students, and to avoid deficit approaches to diversity. Developing teacher education effectiveness to address the needs of diverse students has been recognised as a priority area (TEMAG, 2014). However, although significant efforts have been directed towards building teacher skills to work with diversity, it is unclear how teachers become responsive to students’ differences within the classroom. Thus, this paper examines the question - why superdiversity in education today? It does so through mapping the extant literature on superdiversity, including what counts as superdiversity; what is ‘super’ about superdiversity; what are the strengths and limitations of the approach; and how can a re-conceptualisation of superdiversity address the criticisms of the approach to linguistic and cultural diversity? In so doing, the paper addresses a gap in knowledge about teacher workforce development by focusing on the teacher capabilities required to teach responsively and inclusively, rather than focusing solely on the quality of professional education (initial and ongoing) that teachers receive.