



Why interculturalism does not always translate into action: Insights from teachers in an Australian primary school

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Abstract

For intercultural education to impact learners and, in turn, wider society, teachers must turn intercultural perspectives into actions in their professional contexts. This article examines why teachers who hold positive intercultural views might not be compelled to teach to these in their classrooms. Focusing specifically on education for culturally diverse learners, this article presents a critical ethnographic study of two teachers working in a multicultural Australian primary school. It analyses the tensions that complicate teachers' work for intercultural education, and suggests that competent, well-intentioned teachers might be discouraged from responding pedagogically to their students' cultural or linguistic backgrounds because of perceived constraints in the contemporary neoliberal educational environment. This prompts our recommendation that future research seek ways to open up new conditions of possibility for teachers to act on their perspectives including opportunities for increased cross-cultural engagement and dialogue.

Keywords Intercultural education · Culture · Language · Teacher agency · Neoliberalism

Introduction

Teachers play a fundamental role in developing students' intercultural understanding (Walton et al., 2013) and in creating more tolerant and accepting schools needed to support social and educational success, particularly for racial, ethnic, religious and cultural minorities (Cummins, 2015; Nieto, 2009). Yet research has identified a gap between the theory of intercultural education and its application in practice (Gorski, 2008; Pöhlmann, 2016; Walton et al., 2013), and teachers who support the values and goals of

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intercultural education confess that they do not always address these in their classrooms (Agostinnetto & Bugno, 2020; Picower, 2015). As a result, the capability of intercultural curricula to stimulate positive, longer term social and cultural change is undermined (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lingard & Keddie, 2013).

This phenomenon does not occur in a vacuum. Several decades of global educational and social reform have resulted in an educational sector increasingly driven by market-oriented ideals (Attick, 2017; Ball, 2016; Goodson & Rudd, 2017), and a teaching profession heavily invigilated with increasing standardisation and high-stakes accountability through teaching standards and assessments (Wilkins et al., 2021). Concepts such as bench-marking, accountability, quality, performance, productivity, service, competition and choice pervade educational discourse and practice (Kostogriz & Doecke, 2013; Sardoč, 2018), having been co-opted from the market into education as part of the neoliberal project of market-based social relations (Bourdieu, 1991). The impact of this educational climate on the teaching profession is well-documented (for instance, see Attick, 2017; Ball, 2016; Biesta, 2017; Brathwaite, 2017; Goodson & Rudd, 2017). Much is also known about the constraining effects on the curriculum by assessment of areas such as literacy and numeracy (e.g., Jaeger, 2017; Kostogriz & Doecke, 2013; Yeh, 2018). Less is known about the extent to which neoliberal agendas influence curriculum that deals with the personal procedural knowledges that policymakers view as of value to students' future lives, such as intercultural skills and capabilities.

Drawing from a larger project about the educational achievement of a group of ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse learners, this study considers why well-intentioned teachers who *appear* to have high levels of intercultural understanding may not incorporate this into classroom practice. Extending our review of existing research into the enablers and impediments to intercultural education in schools, we analyse the case of two teachers working in a multicultural Australian primary school and the effects of the current educational climate on their professional agency and intercultural practices in teaching culturally diverse learners. Our analysis is informed by Bourdieu's (1990a, 1990b) theory of social and cultural reproduction which highlights the role of schools in replicating societal stratification. Bourdieu's theory is relational and it aims to reconcile individual agency with social structures (Maton, 2012), so analysis from this theoretical perspective explores the delicate interplay between an individual's dispositions and socialisation (*habitus*), the economic and symbolic assets the individual accumulates (*capital*) and the social spaces through which the individual moves (*fields*) (Bourdieu, 1990b). Based on our analysis, we propose that the contextual constraints of neoliberalism on teachers' actions in the classroom impose new conditions of (im)possibility for narrowing the gap between intercultural theory and practice.

Enablers and impediments to intercultural education

Teachers who enact intercultural education with purpose in their daily practice generally act in accordance with their underlying, personal values that may include positive attitudes towards cultural and linguistic diversity and cultural sensitivity

(Abacioglu et al., 2019; Petrović et al., 2016). Analysing the essays of 21 committed and passionate teachers, Nieto (2006) suggested five qualities for effective teachers of learners who are racially, culturally, ethnically and linguistically diverse: a sense of mission; solidarity with and empathy for their students; the courage to challenge mainstream knowledge; improvisation; and a passion for social justice. These qualities act as ‘ideological anchors’ which ground and sustain teachers’ actions (Gay, 2010) and empower teachers to empower their students (Samuels et al., 2019).

At the same time, teachers who hold negative views are less likely to enact intercultural education in their classrooms. Teachers’ practices are impacted if they harbour personal negative attitudes towards specific cultures and languages and these manifest, for example, as latent racism, unconscious bias, and unrecognised cultural prejudice (Kressler & Cavendish, 2020; Moore, 2018). In addition, because intercultural education sometimes traverses sensitive territory, teachers may be reluctant to engage with confronting or controversial issues in the classroom (Aragona-Young & Sawyer, 2018; Charity Hudley & Mallinson, 2017; Keddie et al., 2019; Miled, 2019; Phoon et al., 2013). Whilst some teachers may feel a limited sense of self-efficacy or confidence with teaching aspects of intercultural education (Atilas et al., 2017; Gomez & Diarrassouba, 2014), others reportedly possess an over-blown sense of confidence in their own teaching skills such that they become complacent in their practices (Carley Rizzuto, 2017; Doran, 2017; Pérez Cañado, 2016). Negative attitudes can also lead to resistance to intellectually scrutinising school practices (Watkins & Noble, 2019) or resistance towards participating in professional development around intercultural topics (Parkhouse et al., 2019). Whilst critical, teacher views and dispositions are, however, amenable to the conditions of possibility in any given context.

Certain educational contexts are more conducive to intercultural approaches than others. Where schools value intercultural education through communities of practice (Brenneman et al., 2019; Doran, 2014), ongoing quality professional development (Biasutti et al., 2020; Tonbuloglu et al., 2016), and school-wide support (Aragona-Young & Sawyer, 2018; Díaz, 2013), teachers are more confident implementing intercultural education in the classroom. These types of initiatives are especially valuable for teachers who see their role in schools as contributing to wider societal goals. Schools play a fundamental role in reproducing group relations, or what Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) termed ‘social reproduction’, so the alignment of curriculum, policy and school initiatives can promote teachers’ autonomy to act upon positive intercultural views.

In contrast, when the school leadership and administration do not provide sufficient support or have insufficient interest in responding to specific student demographics, school-wide intercultural initiatives can be half-heartedly or unsystematically implemented (Karousiou et al., 2019; Miled, 2019). As a teacher commented in Karousiou et al., (2019, p. 248), “We receive no help so when you feel that there is no support you are not motivated to do something extra”, underlining both the importance of school leadership support as well as the critical role of teachers’ individual agency, particularly in contexts that may not be conducive to intercultural approaches to education. Additionally, at a systemic level, policies and guiding documents that justify intercultural education, if they exist, may not be sufficiently

familiar to teachers (Watkins et al., 2016). In cases where policies are familiar, teachers may possess differing interpretations and understandings about their role in supporting or enacting those policies (Coronel & Gómez-Hurtado, 2015; Heineke et al., 2018). In this sense, teachers are both influenced by *and influence* their professional contexts.

However, this bidirectional dynamic is being reshaped by the current dominance of neoliberal logics that deem education to be an individualised and competitive enterprise. As Pöllmann (2016, p. 9) observes, “In times of neoliberal hegemony over educational politics and policies, less socioculturally dominant and often more colloquial funds of intercultural knowledge risk to suffer continued institutional marginalization and curricular obliteration”, suggesting that teachers who possess intercultural knowledge and skills may be increasingly discouraged from utilising these to the benefit of their learners. Such effects are intensified when the wider community is less receptive to other languages and cultures in the school (Adair et al., 2012; Bekerman & Zembylas, 2010). For example, drawing on Australian research, Scarino (2014) illustrates that monolingualism is so entrenched in education and educational policies that other possibilities for education and languages education are overlooked. Scarino (2014, p. 32) writes, “The challenge of unlearning monolingualism in education relates to finding ways of interrogating the assumptions that are deeply embedded in the curriculum, in education and in our own ways of seeing and working in educational communities and in societies”. Such opportunities to interrogate assumptions about language and culture and explore alternatives in practice are necessary for teachers to influence their professional contexts in ways that fully utilise their professional knowledge, skills and inclinations.

Whilst research is clear that positive teacher attitudes and perspectives are integral for teachers’ responsiveness to culturally and linguistically diverse learners, the role of school and other contextual factors in constraining teachers’ intercultural approaches to education requires further exploration. According to Pöllmann (2016, p. 9):

Uncritical celebrations of reflexivity—fuelled by ignorance toward the particular field conditions that may enhance or inhibit its development—distort systematic forms of sociocultural inequality, marginalization, discrimination, and disadvantage, while exaggerating the explanatory weight of (alleged) differences in private initiative, introspective capacities, and individual talent.

In seeking an understanding of ‘particular field conditions’, Pöllmann is referring to Bourdieu’s notion of field which can be interpreted as structured social spaces or socially conditioned areas, characterised by communication and social activity, which individuals and institutions move through (Bourdieu, 1991; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Schools and classrooms are fields in this sense, so investigating their particular conditions can illuminate why the goodwill and best intentions of teachers towards culturally and linguistically diverse learners may not necessarily lead to stronger intercultural responses. Thus, the objective of the current article is to shed light on the relationship between the field and teachers’ experiences to gain a deeper understanding of why teachers who hold positive intercultural stances might not act upon these in the classroom.

The current study

This study used a critical ethnographic approach (Carspecken, 2001; Foley & Valenzuela, 2008) guided by the critical theory of Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu, 1985, 1990a). Critical researchers recognise that equalised power relationships make knowledge claims more valid (Kincheloe et al., 2012; Lather, 2006), and that research is value-laden (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Critical ethnography may be used by researchers to understand the perceptions and cultures of individuals and groups (Carspecken, 2001) in the interests of positive change. Both authors are teacher educators with a deep interest in the perceptions of in-service educators for their value in informing the education and preparation of pre-service teachers. We are also driven to understand the contemporary influences on teachers' work for the purposes of improving the educational experiences of diverse learners.

This study, part of a larger project about the educational achievement of Samoan students, was carried out in a state school situated in a low socioeconomic suburban area of Queensland, Australia. The school had around 1000 students and a multi-cultural demographic: 10% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Australia's Indigenous peoples), 10% African, and more than 50% Pacific Islander mostly of Samoan heritage. Staff turnover was relatively low, according to the principal, and the two Anglo-Australian teachers who are spotlighted in this study had both worked at the school for over a decade, Kim for 14 years and Breana for 13 years. Both had taught every year level of primary school with Kim currently teaching Year 3 and Breana teaching a mixed Year 4/5 class, and both were between 35 and 45 years of age. The teachers were selected using purposeful sampling. From potential teacher participants that the school principal selected for the larger project, the researchers selected Kim and Breana for this study as participants who, through their experiences and knowledge, could provide rich and informative insights into the research question, maximising the usefulness of data (Schreier, 2018).

Upon gaining ethical approval and participant consent, data were collected from and with the teachers. The data reported here focus on two semi-structured interviews and three classroom observations each of Kim and Breana. The number of interviews was restricted by school staffing given that the principal had to organise substitute teachers to release the research participants for interviews, and the number of observations was decided in relation to teacher availability and the school schedule. Both teachers were given the opportunity to member check their interview transcripts, and data were analysed during the research process, consistent with the principles of ethnographic research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Analysis following the theoretical thematic process from Braun and Clarke (2006) which as opposed to inductive analysis, is less data driven and more analyst-driven. It required the researchers to engage with previous literature in the early stages of analysis, leading to less of "a rich description of the data overall, and more a detailed analysis of some aspect of the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). The aspect focussed on in our study was the contrast between teachers' expressed perspectives and their classroom actions around their Samoan students' languages and cultures. Perspectives and actions fall within Bourdieu's concept of habitus, which is "a system of schemes

of thought, perception, appreciation and action” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 40) as well as “the systems of dispositions [individuals] have acquired by internalising a determinate type of social and economic condition” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 104–107). Perspectives and actions are therefore individually held but socially constituted, requiring that we analyse teachers’ experiences in relation with their teaching contexts.

Contrasting perspectives and actions

Kim and Breana are seasoned educators. The principal describes Kim as an “excellent teacher” and Breana as “organised and on the ball”. Kim has seen a lot of changes at the school, stating that there “used to be a lot of Vietnamese when I first started here. The Sudanese community is fairly recent too... the Samoan community has always been here, but not in these numbers”. Breana has taught many families of Samoan learners, saying that she had drawn on her students’ older siblings as a familial and cultural resource until the siblings “outgrew” her, moving on from the primary school. Classroom observations confirmed that the teachers have good relationships with their students. Breana runs a tightly organised school day but peppers firm instructions to students with humour because, in her words, “[Teaching] is also about building relationships with the children, showing that you’re interested in them”. Kim’s classroom has a more casual atmosphere, but the environment is still quite structured in terms of the daily routine and lesson procedures.

Both teachers say they respect and value students’ heritage languages. Breana’s mother had been a Japanese teacher who immersed her in Japanese culture, so she understands the challenge of language learning. Breana expresses admiration that some of her students were speaking three languages besides English at the age of 10. Kim is monolingual but says that no language is more important than any other and she is positively disposed to students’ heritage languages:

I think [students’ languages are] very, very rich. I tell them to value everything and anything they’ve got. Because I often say to them, “I can only speak English. I don’t have a traditional dance. I don’t have a - I’ve got *Waltzing Matilda* [an Australian folk song] and the national anthem”... and I say to them, “You’re very clever. You can do something I can’t do. I can’t speak two language”, and I think that we, in our school... it is valued.

Nevertheless, the teachers’ espoused views about their Samoan students are contrary to their practice. Despite the perceived value of students’ other languages, both teachers attribute their Samoan students’ academic difficulties to a variety of English language challenges. They say that Samoan students have good decoding skills, but struggle with reading comprehension, writing and particularly, spelling, word tense, syntax and text structure. Neither teacher knows, however, whether the students have these skills in Samoan and they are not able to describe students’ language capabilities outside English. The students’ heritage languages, whilst valuable, do not appear to be valuable enough to inform their learning of the national curriculum

language of Standard Australian English, highlighting a tension between teachers' views towards multilingualism outside and within the school.

Another contrast concerns the role of culture in their students' lives, which both teachers respond to affirmatively. In Breana's words:

Yeah, I think they [student cultures] could definitely contribute in giving the kids a bit of a broader view of... life and how the world is and how groups connect. I think this is something that our school is very strong with, just the way that some of our children get on with each other. When we have a new student they don't see a different culture. They just see another kid and those cultures, they all get together. They all get along quite well. We don't have a lot of different racism issues happening in the classroom.

Breana's idea that students' cultures are valued for educating them in "how the world is and how groups connect" but at the same time "when we have a new student they don't see a different culture... they all get along quite well" infers that culture is both unifying and divisive. It is unifying in the outside world, but divisive within the school because it could lead to racism. In terms of incorporating student cultures into their teaching, both teachers discussed how it is part of their everyday teaching practice. For example, Kim stated:

I think a lot of it is just to be culturally sensitive as well as knowing a little bit of the language but that's just a way of touching base and making connections. But I think you need to be, in lots of ways, culturally sensitive to what is and isn't culturally appropriate, so understanding that sometimes not looking at you when you speak, which is... a normal European expectation of respect, is not necessarily normal in your culture.

Being 'culturally sensitive' and 'culturally appropriate' are how both teachers describe their pedagogical approach to teaching their Samoan students.

Yet observations of both teachers' classrooms revealed only a few scattered instances where students' languages and cultures were acknowledged. In a mathematics activity where students created an event menu, Kim's students asked if they could substitute *taro* (a root vegetable) and *sapasui* (Samoan chop suey) for chips and hamburgers, which was permitted. In another instance, Breana's students sang 'Happy birthday' to a student in English followed immediately by the Samoan version. She also describes a letter writing lesson where a Samoan student asked to replace the English greeting with a Samoan one. These acknowledgements of students' language and culture are always incidental, unplanned and never integral to students' learning despite the professed value both teachers attach to their students' language and culture.

In a subsequent joint interview, the teachers were asked why these occurrences of culturally responsive classroom practice were so rare relative to other teaching practices they utilised. Their answers unexpectedly foregrounded their current teaching situation mentioning the "pedagogical agreement" which is a school-wide strategic teaching and learning framework, and the name of a performance-based pay initiative where teachers' pay is linked to the academic performance of their students:

Kim: I guess... we work fairly rigidly at this school to our pedagogical agreement and the way that we deliver our lessons. We deliver ours in terms of consistency so that you will see the same type of learning cycle/teaching cycle happening within the room. It also was a [Department of Education] mandate that... for your [Performance-based pay initiative] that this is the way you do it... that's how we teach and deliver here and it's in terms of consistency. There's nothing unexpected in terms of the lessons. We have visuals with it so that they know exactly what part of the lesson we're in and what's required of them. Breana: Our school is militant because it helps with behaviours. So we are militant in that sense. But I think we have to now be held accountable for every minute we have in the room, for every kid's data as well. So it's our responsibility, especially with this [name of Performance-based pay initiative] coming through, we don't have any choice anymore; it's linked into our pay. Kim: It's always been, I think, an expectation here that this is the behaviour that is expected at school. This is the way that we do it at school. If it's done differently at home, well then that's different. There's... no value judgements on anything that they take, that they say or bring in, or what goes on a home. This is how we do it at school. You really don't address the other issues. I mean, when you're dealing with a lot of other cultures too it's not my place... to make those judgements. It's just that, well, hang on, we're here at school. This is how we do it. We are very much at this school about consistency. We all have the same language when we talk about our behaviour steps. We all have the same language when we structure our lessons or the overall umbrella structure of our lessons, so it's very consistent.

In short, both teachers' used their current working conditions to rationalise why they excluded pedagogical responses to language and culture. They mentioned, for instance, the recently imposed performance-linked pay initiative, the pedagogical framework that promotes the school-wide consistency of explicit pedagogy and consistent metalanguage, and teacher accountability for classroom time and student data. Obliquely, the "no value judgment" statement further tries to neutralise the school as a cultural environment. Thus, the final issue identified in the data was a tension between cultural diversity and cultural consistency. Teachers accommodated unplanned incidences of Samoan culture and language in acknowledgement of cultural diversity, but the school's pedagogical approach, layered with other conditions of the field, is premised on cultural consistency.

Discussion

Understanding the professional challenges of teachers within the current neoliberal milieu is important because the education of culturally diverse learners, and intercultural education more broadly, relies on teachers taking action. As Picower (2015, p. 908) observed, "without action, the structures of oppression that [educators] teach about remain intact". Our data revealed three main tensions between teachers' views and their actions towards culturally and linguistically diverse learners:

multilingualism in tension with English monolingualism, culture as unifying in tension with its divisiveness, and cultural diversity in tension with cultural consistency. These tensions do not represent binary opposites. As Bourdieu (2008/2004) suggested, tensions or contraries can exist together as a unity of mutually affirming contradictory discourses. Nevertheless, these discourses complicate teachers' professional actions and, in a neoliberal performative policy context, constrain the conditions of possibility for teachers' actions.

There is no evidence for questioning the competence and commitment of Kim and Breana in responding to their students' Samoan language and culture; both teachers were highly regarded professionals, they expressly supported students' languages and cultures, and they demonstrated this commitment in incidental ways. However, supporting the findings of previous research which highlighted the influence of wider societal attitudes upon teachers' practices (e.g., Adair et al., 2012; Berman & Zembylas, 2010), the privileging of English over community languages in Australia clearly influenced these teachers' practices such that neither connected students' academic challenges in Standard Australian English with their Samoan language or literacy capabilities. Competence in Standard Australian English is a form of academic capital in Australia so whether a student has oracy or literacy in languages besides English, it is their competence with English that is perceived to facilitate success in education. Recognising (or in Bourdieusian terms, 'misrecognising') Standard Australian English as the dominant language in education lends legitimacy to teachers' work by maintaining the school's cultural and linguistic status quo (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), and having students for whom bi/multilingualism is a norm creates tension with the English monolingualism that is entrenched in Australian school curricula and school practices. The vast majority of learners' community or heritage languages do not feature in the Australian curriculum and are thereby unacknowledged at school, sending a strong message reinforced in other domains of public life (i.e., media, public signage, health and social services information) that multilingualism has limited value. As Scarino (2014) argued, "within general education, unlearning monolingualism involves recognising the mediating role of languages and cultures" (p. 303). This 'unlearning' is important for educators so that they build upon the repertoire of linguistic skills that learners bring to the classroom and provide linguistically appropriate and responsive pedagogies.

The issue of ethnic heritage cultures adds further complexity. Cultures outside the dominant school culture were perceived as both unifying and divisive; valued for their contributions to students' broader education but largely ignored in teachers' practices. Culture draws individuals into groups, but it also divides individuals from others—it is at the same time inclusive and exclusive—so teachers may find it difficult to balance these competing notions. Similar to Keddie et al. (2019), where teachers contended with the competing discourses of religion and secularity, the teachers in the current study defaulted to the position promoted by the school. In referring to the school's performance-linked pay initiative, pedagogical framework promoting school-wide consistency of pedagogy and language, and increased teacher accountability for classroom time and student data, the teachers implied that efforts into unrecognised or less valued areas of teaching performativity were discouraged. As the cultural capital of students was external to the work of schooling

and would not contribute to any measurable school-valued outcomes, it could, by and large, be neglected.

This leads to a further question about how seriously issues of cultural and linguistic diversity are taken in educational policy and practice. All Australian teachers must meet the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* (Australian Institute for Teaching & School Leadership, 2012) which include demonstrating knowledge of teaching strategies that are responsive to the learning strengths and needs of students from diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds (Standard 1.3), and the Australian curriculum includes a general capability called 'Intercultural Understanding'. Yet, as previous research has found that guiding documents are sometimes unfamiliar to teachers (Watkins et al., 2016) and that teachers interpret guiding documents differently (Heineke et al., 2018), it is possible that teachers may have different understandings about what Standard 1.3 and the general capability mean or look like in the classroom. Intercultural Understanding is located outside a learning area, thus placing limited demands on teachers and learners to teach, assess and report upon this capability. Moreover, important terms such as bias, racism and discrimination are not found at all in the Intercultural Understanding learning continuum (Australian Curriculum, 2014) thereby limiting opportunities to explicitly address these issues during class time and tacitly allowing teachers to ignore these issues. These factors likely contributed to the teachers in this study utilising reactive 'cultural sensitivity' rather than proactive, planned pedagogies to satisfy Standard 1.3 and fulfil the general capability of Intercultural Understanding. Furthermore, as found in Miled (2019) and Karousiou et al. (2019) which stress the importance of leadership for implementing intercultural initiatives, the teachers in the current study were not supported at a school-wide level to respond to the multicultural student demographic. Instead, school leaders focussed teachers' attention on a vision of education which was systematised in terms of productivity, consistency and accountability. The messy contraries of culture and language were not accommodated in this vision.

Compared to previous research which attributed teacher complacency to overconfidence (e.g., Carley Rizzuto, 2017; Pérez Cañado, 2016), the apparent complacency of teachers in our study could instead be attributed to the conditions of possibility the teachers perceived in their professional environment. The teachers' relatively safe framing of their approach to education as 'cultural sensitivity' and 'cultural appropriateness' reinforced the lack of authorisation, curricular opportunity, and even some reluctance to take a more critical stance involving issues of equity, anti-racism and anti-bias (Charity Hudley & Mallinson, 2017; Miled, 2019; Phoon et al., 2013).

The full effects of the field became evident when the teachers broached their current working conditions as reasons for why culturally responsive teaching was rarely observed in their classrooms. In contrast with Watkins and Noble (2019) who found that teachers "resisted the intellectual task of doing diversity differently" (p. 295), the teachers in our study problematised the standardised school-wide pedagogy for its rigidity, noting as Kim did, that the emphasis on consistency meant that "you really don't address the other issues". Breana's comments about being accountable for "every minute we have in the room, for every kid's data as well" and feeling that

“we don’t have any choice any more” points to the sense of restriction teachers felt in their profession and the inhibitive nature of the field. As Attick (2017) argued:

In a neoliberal model, where students’ economic productivity and market value become the purpose of schooling, teaching becomes less an act of developing well-rounded, civic minded, engaged human beings, and more focussed on developing the specific skills that students will need to participate as both producers and consumers in the market.

From this perspective, the constraint that teachers felt appear to be a direct effect of the neoliberal educational model. Skills lacking direct market value such as students’ heritage languages, cultures, equity and anti-discrimination became sidelined, and teachers’ professional dispositions to fulfil their educational duty towards culturally diverse learners also became marginalised.

The constraints on teacher agency affect other aspects of professional life such as teachers’ professional identities. Kostogriz (2013, p. 92) explained that the neoliberal world, “is indifferent to the everyday life of teachers in schools, their unique locations in communities, their decision-making about what and how to teach, and their situated sense of responsibility for students”. This indifference is evident when the autonomy of teachers to make professional decisions is challenged by mandates from educational authorities about how to teach, especially when mandates work in tandem with punitive performance-based pay initiatives. Teachers like Kim and Breana possessed deep professional knowledge from both having worked in the same school setting for over a decade and seeing waves of different cultural groups come through the community, but new regimes of productivity and accountability diminished the value of their knowledge. Not only does this type of environment stifle the capacity of teachers to make decisions about the pedagogies that suit their learners, it also fuels other issues in the profession: teacher attrition, deskilling of the profession, devaluation of teaching as a career and innumerable related issues.

What is increasingly apparent is that in restrictive or inhibitive school environments, teachers are less likely to turn positive intercultural stances into practice, using what agency they have to default to the performative expectations of the school. This does not mean that teachers lack agency in transforming their perspectives into behaviours in such an environment, but only that they are much less likely to use their agency to do so (Bourdieu, 1991). This increases the risk of teachers working against their own professional instincts and inclinations and becoming complicit in reinforcing societal inequities.

If, as our study suggests, an educational context is so professionally restrictive that teachers have perspectives that they do not act upon, then disrupting this phenomenon requires a radical transformation of the social conditions of the field (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu, 1990b). This entails dissection of the challenges that teachers contend with day-to-day, as we have attempted to do here. It also suggests that research explore how alternative conditions of possibility that encourage teachers to act in alignment with their perspectives can be created. Research is also needed into increased cross-cultural engagement and dialogue to counteract the standardising effects of neoliberal performative curricular and policies (Portera, 2020). Without creating other conditions of possibility, it is

the exceptional and courageous teachers who will swim against the neoliberal tide and advocate for their culturally diverse learners (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Nieto, 2006). In the meantime, we leave well-meaning and competent teachers, potential intercultural allies like Kim and Breana, to fend for themselves.

Conclusion

This article set out to explore why teachers' positive views about intercultural education may not necessarily translate into classroom actions. Our results highlighted three contrasting discourses held in tension: multilingualism/English monolingualism; culture as unifying/divisive; and cultural diversity/consistency. We proposed that teachers grapple with these discourses and then, despite their inclinations towards valuing learners' culture and language, concede to the conditions of possibility within their educational context. Here, the context was shaped through performance-linked pay initiatives, a rigid school-wide pedagogical approach, and the onus on teachers to account for classroom time and student data.

To create the conditions for teachers to act on and develop their intercultural capacities, we recommended that research further explore professional perspectives in relation to professional actions and seek ways that different conditions of possibility can be created for teachers. Such research may open up alternative orientations to the education of culturally diverse learners, ones that move beyond a notion heavily relied upon in the field of intercultural education, that if we simply raise teachers' cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity or critical consciousness, then classroom action will follow.

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Conflicts of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

Ethical approval Ethics was approved prior to the project proceeding (H14REA093) by the University of Southern Queensland.

Consent to participate Written consent to participate in the project was gained by both research participants prior to the collection of data.

Consent for publication Written consent for data to be published was gained by all research participants prior to the collection of data.

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