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The Logics of Multiculturalism and Schemas of Difference: Rethinking the Schooled Identities of Australian Multicultural Education

The changing nature of cultural diversity in Australia has posed key challenges to the relevance of the multicultural policies developed thirty years ago. Indeed, given the public anxieties around social cohesion that have arisen in the wake of national and international crises, many question the need to have multiculturalism at all. Within this context, the conceptual foundations of multiculturalism are found to be wanting, not least because the diverse 'logics' of multiculturalism - cultural maintenance, social justice and equity, community harmony, anti-racism - are in tension. This paper draws on case studies in education to explore the consequences of multicultural schemas of perception which foreground cultural difference. It demonstrates how logics of multiculturalism are translated into practices in often problematic ways, producing 'schooled identities' which feature forms of essentialism, cultural pathologisation and relativism that impede the goals of social equity. Yet, given the public sympathy for multiculturalism, this paper argues for a strategic reconceptualisation rather than the abandonment of multiculturalism as it provides an effective language for a critical dialogue about the practices and aims of cultural inclusion and social justice.