Desperately seeking the global subject: international education, citizenship and cosmopolitanism

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This article takes the case of international education and Australian state schools to argue that the economic, political and cultural changes associated with globalisation do not automatically give rise to globally oriented and supra-territorial forms of subjectivity. The tendency of educational institutions such as schools to privilege narrowly instrumental cultural capital perpetuates and sustains normative national, cultural and ethnic identities. In the absence of concerted efforts on the part of educational institutions to sponsor new forms of global subjectivity, flows and exchanges like those that constitute international education are more likely to produce a neo-liberal variant of global subjectivity.

Introduction

Discussions of global citizenship and cosmopolitanism in globalisation literature go beyond narrow ethno-cultural nationalism and patriotism\textsuperscript{1} to highlight global governance (Held, 2001, 2002), openness to cultural diversity (Hannerz, 1996) and recognition and regard for a common humanity (Nessabaum, cited in Urry, 2000; Gill & Howard, 2002; Turner, 2002). Implicit in these debates are assumptions of individual autonomy, free choice and agency. The starting point for this article is globalisation’s potential for cosmopolitanism and the development of globally oriented subjectivities. We draw on the findings of an exploratory study into the experiences of international students in Australian schools to examine the subjectivities arising through the flows and exchanges which constitute international education. Informed by post-structural critiques of autonomous agency, we highlight the ways students are placed, thrown, located under and subject to positions which precede and exceed them. We argue that agential forms of citizenship, cosmopolitanism and global

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consciousness are a source of optimistic inspiration, but they are not automatically initiated by processes of internationalization and globalisation.

Our empirical findings suggest that in the case of international education two processes are at play. First, the normalizing discourses of nationality, race and ethnicity permeate international education to reinforce old ethnic and national affiliations while stimulating new ‘racial’ formations. Second, given its economic rationale, practices of international education uphold the global spread of hegemonic social practices such as the marketization of education. Under these conditions international education does not necessarily establish the conditions for unsettling ethno-cultural and nationalistic persuasions and practices and thus misses the opportunity to sponsor cosmopolitan identification and globally oriented subjectivity. In short, international education is as likely to give rise to profoundly conservative ethnocultural affiliations and largely instrumental notions of global citizenship as to generate a collective and compassionate global subject.

This research

Inspired by cultural theorists of globalisation such as Appadurai (1996), Wilson & Dissanayake (1996) and Featherstone (1996), we initially set out to investigate how high school students on the Sunshine Coast, in the Australian state of Queensland, used communication technologies (e.g. Internet, Email, chat lines, etc.) to establish transnational connections. We were interested in how global processes (‘globalisation’) might be producing cosmopolitan attitudes, practices and transnational affiliations (‘globally oriented subjectivities’). It soon became obvious that the increased take-up of information and communication technologies were not in themselves sufficient to drive transnational associations. Mainstream high school students in the pilot study used Internet technology to ‘hook up’ with friends after school and weekends, but appeared to have few links outside the locality.

Our research focus subsequently shifted to inquire whether an institution widely associated with nation building, the school, facilitated cultural, affective and cognitive encounters with various global others through the recruitment of international students. We reasoned that the presence of international students in the school community would afford greater opportunities for co-presence, dialogue and connectedness than abstract engagements with a series of global images and icons. As most of the empirical work on international education has concentrated on the higher education sector, we decided to focus on how state schools, which we perceived to be more representative of class and cultural diversities than universities, sponsor new forms of global identification and imagination. Further, we were curious whether cosmopolitan practices and identifications, namely conceiving the world as a whole and building affiliations with the international student other, are more pronounced in schools with a high population of international students.

In hindsight this study was a ‘desperate’ search for the global subject. We use the term desperate advisedly, because the achievement of global subjectivity, it seemed to us, is a key redeeming feature of the international education field in Australia, which
is principally motivated by economic considerations (Matthews, 2002b; Sidhu, 2002, 2004). We were also motivated to investigate what global flows and processes were about. This seemed especially pertinent in light of our pilot study, which did not show any connections between young people’s use of communication technologies and their transnational affiliations.

Using interviews and focus groups, we examined the social relations and interconnections of international high school students against current writings on globalisation, cosmopolitanism, global citizenship and globally oriented citizenship. We interviewed 56 international students and four teachers at one Sunshine Coast and two Brisbane high schools. Student interviews were conducted in self-directed focus groups of four or five students. The students were in upper school (Years 11 and 12) and aged between 16 and 18 years. Their countries of origin were China (28), Korea (3), Indonesia (2), Thailand (6), Japan (3), Hong Kong (2), Vietnam (6), Taiwan (3), Papua New Guinea (2) and Germany (2).

This paper proceeds in the following way. In the next section we describe salient themes in globalisation literature arguing, by reference to current trends in supply and demand, that economic expressions of globalisation are shaping the international education sector. We locate these trends in the supply and demand of international education in both historical and contemporary geopolitical power relations. We follow on with a theoretical exposition on cosmopolitanism and its potential for the development of globally oriented subjectivities. Specifically, we discuss definitions and deficiencies in contemporary understandings of cosmopolitanism and their potential to contribute towards the achievement of globally oriented citizenship. We then describe and analyse findings from our focus group interviews with international students, showing that in the context of school practices the conditions of possibility for the achievement of globally oriented, cosmopolitan subjectivities are limited.

**Globalisation**

Globalisation refers to a wide range of discrepant phenomenon, but is commonly portrayed in singular and economic terms as reflecting an evolutionary, inevitable and irreversible phase of societal development. The expansion of national economic systems into an integrated, interconnected, borderless, competitive global marketplace is constructed as a ‘natural’ periodisation of human civilization, progressing from agriculture to industrialism and post-industrialism with its attendant advancements in information and communication technologies and transport (Jessop, 2000; Bergeron, 2001).

A shortcoming of existing research is a tendency to study globalising processes through a disciplinary lens, while minimizing the interplays and interdependencies between the economic, political and cultural dimensions of globalisation (Robertson & Khondker, 1998). Globalisation studies have been criticized for their ‘methodological nationalism’, studying global phenomena through the lens of territorialist geography (see Beck, 2000, 2004), as opposed to adopting a ‘multiscalar’ approach which demands ‘wide and deep’ engagements with the local, national and global
Such studies have also been criticized for a collective failure to engage with space and time, a manifest outcome of which is a largely parochial and first worldist account of globalisation which ignores the histories of capitalism, colonialism and imperialism (Tikly, 2001; Slater, 2002; Venn, 2002).

Recent research on globalising processes and global flows have acknowledged the disembedded and disembodied quality of many theoretical accounts of globalisation and have highlighted the power/knowledge relations implicit in how we imagine and theorize the global (Allen, 1999; Held et al., 2000; Amin, 2002; Larner & Walters, 2002; Slater, 2002). What is now being argued for is a series of theoretical and empirical engagements, which embrace practices of the global (Larner & Walters, 2002).

The profoundly complex relations between local, national and global are often theorized as weakening the regulatory capacities of nation states while increasing the influence of multinational corporations and supranational bodies. However, the case of international education would suggest that the first world nation state is not losing control of education but rather education systems are being increasingly pressed into the service of national, economic and social ends (see Green, 1997; Marginson, 1997, 2002). The story is different for developing nations, who are forced to make ‘structural adjustments’ (Carnoy, 1995; Tikly, 1999) that entail rolling back state education provisions.

It is important to stress that Western neo-liberal responses to global capitalism are not ‘inevitable’ or ‘necessary’ responses to the ‘demands of globalisation’ (Henry et al., 1999; Marginson, 1999). It is also important to recognize the ideological basis of this thinking and the extent to which it stymies alternative ways of thinking about and organizing education (Levin, 1998). Having highlighted some of the problems associated with the way in which globalisation is studied and imagined, a caveat is in order. It is beyond this paper’s scope to provide a detailed critique of the writings on globalisation. We will restrict our comments to selective writings that have commented on the cultural dimensions of globalisation, which is the area of greatest relevance to this paper.

Broadly, cultural theorists stress mobility and interconnectedness and regard flows of people (facilitated by travel) and flows of ideas and ideologies (facilitated by sophisticated communications technologies and the media) as obliterating the tyranny of distance so that: ‘relationships between people in disparate locations will be formed as easily as people in proximate ones’ (Waters, 2001, p. 5). New transnational connections and new forms of commodification are noted to assist ‘boundary crossings’ and to hasten the formation of cultural hybridities. The globe is regarded as replacing the national/local as an identity referent, thus establishing conditions for freeing subjects from fixed identities while reducing the possibilities for cultural domination and imperialism. Globalising processes are also credited with transforming the conditions of people’s lives producing: ‘new ways of doing business and working, new forms of identity and politics, new forms of everyday life, time and space, new forms of sociability’ (Featherstone, 2002, p. 4).

The basis of much of the criticism of cultural narratives of globalisation has been a tendency to disarticulate understandings of flows and hybridities from power
geometries, including those inspired by political economy or geography (see Mitchell, 1997; Anthias, 2001; Larner & Walters, 2002). The troubling labour mobilities of women and children (see Chin, 1998; Urry, 2000; Bergeron, 2001; Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002) and ‘travelogues’ of asylum seekers and refugees (Christie & Sidhu, 2002) are subsumed into the discourse which portrays ‘flows’ of people as benign, smooth and unmediated by structural problems such as poverty, war, failed states and an inequitable global trade. As Parrenas (2000) reminds us, the processes of globalisation and forms of hybridization experienced by third world women such as Filipino domestic maids and sex workers are qualitatively different from those experienced by global intellectuals and entrepreneurs. The free floating, fleet-footed, globally mobile individual for whom the world is borderless and opportunities boundless is problematically premised on the dispositions, aspirations and opportunities of the Euro-American, first world, elite, masculine subject.

**Globally-oriented citizens and ‘grounded’ cosmopolitans**

Although the term cosmopolitan dates back to ancient Greece, referring to a citizen of the world (kosmou politês), the utopian imaginary which underpins the notion of world citizen, extended beyond Greco-Roman and early Christian religious and philosophical thought towards modernity. The cosmopolitan citizen of the world informed Kant’s vision of a ‘perpetual peace’, Goethe’s criticism of German militarism and Marx’s dream of an international socialism (Turner, 2002, p. 48). At its simplest, a cosmopolitan orientation is associated with an intellectual and aesthetic sense of openness towards peoples, places and experiences from different cultures, especially those from different nations (Tomlinson, cited in Szerszynski & Urry, 2002).

However, cosmopolitanism has also inspired criticism, which takes two broad and related forms. First, a banal cosmopolitanism stands accused of producing little in the way of commitment to globally oriented citizenship. Banal cosmopolitanism, the consumption of global brands, icons, peoples, heroes, public figures, foreign travel and multicultural food, does not necessarily include an awareness of global issues such as world peace, global warming, environmental destruction and global human rights. It does not necessarily extend to ethical and moral commitments to a global community. Indeed, early research would suggest that a sense of moral connectedness with and compassion for global others is noted to decrease with distance (see Szerszynski & Urry, 2002).

Second, cosmopolitanism is criticized for its reliance on masculinist, individualist and elitist dispositions and for its ‘co-articulation’ with a colonial and imperial governmentality (Venn, 2002). Cosmopolitan elites can choose to disconnect themselves from the local, including severing their responsibilities to contribute to local or national states (Szerszynski & Urry, 2002). As mobile elites they enjoy the freedom of physical movement and communication, in stark contrast to those who are confined to place, whose fate is to remain located (Featherstone, 2002, p. 1).

Against this backdrop, cosmopolitan elites from both the first and non-first world have been criticized for perpetuating the expansion of global capitalism. Here,
post-colonial and Marxist accounts stress that the ‘remnant’ structures of power established by colonization and extended by capitalism have given rise to a new transnational capitalist class of ‘international bourgeoisie of frequent flier executives, financiers, bureaucrats, professionals and media personnel’ (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2000), as well as cultural tourists without the capacity or desire to form lasting attachments (Sklair, 2001; Venn, 2002). The elite subject who is sympathetic to Western values and global capitalism cannot be considered to be the normative global subject. It is in this light that Wilson (1998) cites Hannerz to suggest caution about celebrating the transformative potential of transnational class cosmopolitans, who might also be deemed diasporic opportunists.

With this in mind, theorists like Mitchell (1997) and Anthias (2001) have cautioned against premature celebrations of hybridity, maintaining that global flows and exchanges continue to be underwritten by power relations which ultimately do little to further ethical and moral issues. Mitchell’s (2001) analysis of the transnational cosmopolitanism of Hong Kong Chinese business migrants to Canada raises the issue of whether global processes and exchanges are skewed towards the formation of predominantly neo-liberal global subjects.

In response to criticisms that identify cosmopolitanism with cultural relativism, moral indifference and vague liberal universalism, Turner (2002) proposes the concept of ‘cosmopolitan virtue’, which he associates with reflexive distance from the homeland, ironic self-reflection and some prior emotional commitment to place (‘patriotism’). In an era of global fragmentation and hybridity, of mixes, mergers and representations, cosmopolitanism requires a ‘cool’ and ironic distancing from one’s own culture and the capacity to interrogate ‘unreflective identifications with local and national cultures’ while maintaining an ethic of care based on the recognition of human and cultural vulnerability (Turner, 2002; see also Szerszynski & Urry, 2002). An exemplary form of cosmopolitanism is embodied in diasporic intellectuals whose cosmopolitan sensibilities are not passive or uncritical but marked by resistance, irony, selectivity and humour (see Appadurai, 1996).

Turner’s perspective on cosmopolitanism is radical in that he links it with patriotism; love of and commitment to a place. While acknowledging that place-bound commitments can detract from the ability to respect others in distance places, offering as an example the case of American patriotism post September 11, he maintains that ‘irony without patriotism may be too cool and thin to provide for identification and involvement with place and with politics’ (Turner, 2002, p. 56).

Recent scholarly commentary has constructed cosmopolitanism as a corollary of globalisation, raising the spectre and possibility of global citizenship (Appadurai, 1996; Hannerz, 1996; Scholte, 2000; Urry, 2000; Beck, 2002; Held, 2002). Contemporary interest in global citizenship is prompted by the need to explore alternative understandings of loyalties, membership, identities, rights and obligations arising in the context of globalisation. The notion of global citizenship is not without its critics, having been criticized as being unpractical and ‘too abstract’ to generate the emotional and moral energy needed to galvanize action and make changes (Parekh, 2003, p. 12). The idea of a world state is further problematized, with Parekh arguing
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that such an entity is more likely than not to be ‘remote, bureaucratic, oppressive and culturally bland’ (Parekh, 2003).

In place of global citizenship the case is made for ‘globally oriented citizens’ who discharge their duties to global others by exercising their responsibilities as democratic citizens and where necessary by challenging narrow nationalistic policies which are against the interests of humankind:

when our government props ups dictatorships in other countries, supplies them dangerous weapons, corrupts, manipulates and destabilises vulnerable leaders, imposes unfavourable trade agreements, and in other all too familiar ways pursues narrowly selfish policies, we must challenge it by means of organised pressure and protests. … Apathetic citizens who have no interest in the conduct of their government are neither good national nor good global citizens. (Parekh, 2003, p. 13)

The argument here is that a cosmopolitanism which extends the capacity to mediate between and within national cultures is positive if it creates possibilities for dialogue with the traditions and discourses of others and if it widens the horizons of one’s own framework of meaning. Parekh goes on to argue that ‘we should not fetishise sovereignty and treat it as an unmixed good but look behind it to see if it serves worthwhile goals’ (Parekh, 2003, p. 15). This recognition of citizenship as the primary mode of individual and collective identity and the tangible duties it entails grounds the ‘free floating’ global subject in space and time.

Globally oriented citizenship thus parallels national citizenship on two counts. First, it refers to political activity and empirical assumptions to do with law, justice and rights. Second, it depends on an ‘imagined community’ of people sharing the same transcendent human values of humanitarianism, respect, justice and non-violence (Parekh, 2003; see also Stokes, 1996).

Having discussed the conceptual difficulties in both cosmopolitanism and global citizenship, what is clear is that our understandings of both concepts must embrace ethical and moral commitments. The extended processes which connect people, places and commodities, cosmopolitan lifestyles and plural subjectivities will contribute little towards socially just, democratic and egalitarian forms of subjectivity without moral and ethical engagements. Whereas citizenship previously served the patriarchal modern state and its capitalist classes, it must now reflect the globalising imperatives that are creating the conditions of possibility for new identities and new working conditions. For some theorists this means uncoupling nationality from citizenship and promoting global citizenship and responsibility. For others it demands a deepening of one’s democratic citizenship of a nation.

International education

The top provider countries of international education are the USA, the UK and Australia, followed by Canada and New Zealand. In 2000 there were 13 129 international students enrolled in Australian schools, most of whom were students from Asia, from a non-English speaking background. The main source countries for international students are India, Indonesia, South Korea, Japan and China, with, 83% of
international student enrolments in schools from these countries (Australian Education International, 2000). The total number of international students in British schools is harder to estimate as state (government) schools are not required to collect information about their numbers. In 2002 the Independent Schools Council estimated that there were 15,800 international students enrolled in private (independent) schools which contributed about £243 million to the UK economy (Independent Schools Council, 2003). Typically, international students enrolled in UK institutions come from the former British colonies, although more recent trends indicate interest from students in neighbouring European countries.

The movement of predominantly Asian students from non-English speaking countries into Western English-speaking centres remains fundamentally unidirectional and is a legacy of British and American colonialism which secured English as the key language of global commerce (Wilson & Dissanayake, 1996; Bennell & Pearce, 1998; Spring, 1998; Willinsky 1998). As we found in discussions with our interviewees, acquiring English language competence is assuming a renewed urgency and importance, with many young people associating English skills with development and progress, both of themselves and their country (see also Pegrum, 2004, p. 5). From the perspective of the individual, learning English offers the opportunity for professional, cultural and economic advantage. However, the dominance of English language in the global education market takes on a different guise if delinked from the level of individual aspiration and considered at the macro level (Pegrum, 2004). In a globalising world which purports to offer a stunning profusion of possibilities, the prominence of English demands further investigation and here the work of post-colonial theorists is potentially useful in highlighting the material and discursive links between international education, modernity, colonialism and imperialism (see Willinsky, 1998).

Early expressions of international education, education aid programmes, were inspired by the rationales of colonialism, which were intended to produce an acculturated, governing elite in the colonies who were anticipated to support Western interests. Imperialism’s influence extended to the post-independent societies, which were steered towards a Westernized template of civics, towards sameness rather than diversity. These links continue to have implications for the capacity of contemporary expressions of international education to author post-colonial forms of cosmopolitanism (Venn, 2002).

That stated, it can be plausibly argued that cultural tolerance and cosmopolitanism was an unexpected and unintended consequence of European trade, the growth of capitalism and colonialism (Turner, 2002). We want to make a similar argument with respect to the current trade in education. In other words, we are not condemned to repeat history as there are ways that we can dissociate international education from the 21st century neo-imperial project.

A shortcoming of recent studies into international education concerns their ahistorical focus. By implication, international education is presented as a direct and desirable manifestation of globalisation. It is not surprising then that some educators use the terms ‘globalisation’ and ‘internationalization’ interchangeably.
(Edwards & Tudball, 2000; Clyne et al., 2001). Perceiving international education as a natural and inevitable manifestation of globalisation serves to create and reinforce particular notions of a global future (Clyne et al., 2001), a trend which is found elsewhere in the field of education, where discursive dominance is accorded to the commercial and technological expressions of global connectivity.

Just as dominant interpretations of globalisation highlight economic processes and effects, dominant understandings of international education highlight economic necessity and financial benefits. These neo-liberal accounts of international education are ‘globalocentric’ in that they assume that international education is ordered by the dictates of the ungovernable and unpredictable global market. According to the premises of a neo-liberal governmentality, ‘global educational service providers’ are simply responding to the economic and cultural trends of globalisation to produce highly skilled knowledge workers (Kenway & Bullen, 2003). The state is depicted as assuming a minimal regulatory role as deregulated markets are thought to adjust themselves to generate the best educational services and goods.

Yet, it has been the state’s embrace of neo-liberal ideologies which have reduced support for public education and propelled both universities and, increasingly, state schools to sell education to international students to raise revenue. Furthermore, the globalisation of neo-liberal economics is partly responsible for the actions of governments in the ‘South/East’, which have curtailed investment in public education. Such push factors have reduced domestic capacity and propelled individuals and their families to seek an overseas education, often at significant personal cost.

The politically neutral language of the market provides little discursive space for understanding these complexities which surround the production and consumption of international education. Market language dilutes the importance of non-discursive forces and processes in favour of explanations vested in notions of consumer choice, autonomy and agency. Trade statistics help to normalize and celebrate the smooth benign and ‘natural’ aspects of flows of people and capital. Thus, in the Australian context, the ‘success’ of international education is usually framed in terms of rising demand. At the same time, promotional and marketing narratives construct international education as a cosmopolitan enterprise which initiates intercultural and cross-national approaches to curricula and pedagogy, stimulates interest in foreign languages, diversifies student demographies and fosters academic excellence, while facilitating client-centred structures and processes in schools and universities.

The underside of trade-based expressions of international education is that it diverts precious resources to recruitment and marketing activities and imposes narrow and short-term understandings of ‘value for money’ as grids against which to determine good educational practice. Efforts to fulfil consumer demand may result in a conservative and narrow curriculum that devalues non-vocational, visionary and experimental activities (see Mitchell, 2001). Surplus revenue may lead to reductions in government funds, but more significantly a user pays approach to state education is inegalitarian and undemocratic. It provides an additional basis of support for the private sector and undermines the commitment to free and universal public education (McCollow, 1989; Marginson, 1997, 1999).
Although the most salient policy developments in international education have affected the higher education sector, many are mirrored in Australian schools. However, the impact of international education on state schooling in Australia remains a relatively under-studied area, apart from work by McCollow (1989) and Matthews (2002b). Extrapolating findings from research carried out in tertiary settings, while not entirely satisfactory, is potentially useful to identify ways of studying how social relations and subjectivities are produced in, and through, the international education enterprise. Kenway and Bullen’s (2003) feminist investigation of transculturation amongst female tertiary students is a case in point. They observe that in the absence of research analysing global subjectivity, it is often assumed that international students are global citizens. However, international women students sometimes participate in their construction as ‘other’ by incorporating and adapting raced and gendered representations, while in other instances they do so by resisting such representations.

As with empirical work which seeks to study globalising processes and global flows, the links between globalisation and international education demand more sophisticated methodologies. We need to attend to the complex and contradictory ways in which the economic, political and cultural intersect to shape not only students’ personal ambitions and aspirations, but also domestic educational capacity in sending countries, as well as broader supply side issues that are currently producing the predominantly commercial expressions of international education in the Anglo-American world.

The legacies of colonialism and the role played by nation states in their quest to maintain comparative national advantage have created the conditions for spatializing knowledge by perpetuating the largely unidirectional flow of students from the ‘South/East’ to the ‘North/West’. Although we argue below that the trade is predominantly intended to profit state education providers, this is not to suggest that teachers and educationalists are unable to shape the conditions of possibility for a unique, cosmopolitan brand of international education which promotes a globally oriented citizenship.

**International students**

Our focus on the grounded micro-context of schools provides an empirical context in which to examine the national identity building enterprise of education, including the way racialized and gendered practices establish the boundaries of belonging. The citizenship work of schools remains deeply embedded in national and patriarchal practices. This is reflected in everyday practices, school traditions and rituals, including those which define school identity, standards of behaviour and dress codes, sporting, cultural and academic achievements (Gill & Howard, 2002). Men invariably hold positions of power and school parades, assemblies and rituals celebrate the violence of war, invasion and conquest (e.g. Anzac Day and Australia Day). These practices remain typical in the state of Queensland, although, as Gill and Howard (2002) suggest, there may be regional differences across Australia.
At a school we visited noted for its commitment to internationalization, the taken-for-granted privileges of an Anglo heritage, nomenclature and norms were all too obvious as teachers struggled to pronounce the surnames of several international students. The Principal opened the assembly with a discussion of courtesy, promoted as a universal marker of good manners. The interactions at this school assembly resonated with our own experiences of schooling uncomfortably marked by our visible ‘minority’ status, and the ever present assumed ‘correspondence’ between appearance, ‘race’, citizenship, nationality and ethnicity. At another school international students identified particular spaces within the school’s grounds as ‘Australian’ or ‘international’. Instead of socializing with local students, they occupied a room at the end of the block during their lunch break and recess and mixed among themselves.

Interviews confirmed that students’ everyday experiences were marked by separation and disconnection from local students. While students appreciated the kindness of some Australian students, they were aware of the indifference, fear and ignorance of others. A heightened awareness of national, cultural, ethnic and racial difference influenced their choice of friends, as the following excerpt suggests:

G1: Yeah, I think they maybe at first they say; you look so totally different from them. They may have strange thoughts about you. I don’t know.

G3: I think they are very helpful

G1: Pardon?

G3: Helpful.

G2: Yeah, many of them are really helpful, yeah but many of them are cold and unfriendly.

G1: They like to play with Australian students.

G3: Yeah, they don’t really like to hang around Asian students.

G1: Well, to me I would think maybe they think you’re different so they sort of, don’t know you and they don’t understand your background and that’s why they feel different from you. They fear to have contact with you.

G2: And we are too. (Two Vietnamese and one girl from Hong Kong, 16 years old)

Culture and communication were perceived to be barriers to intercultural interactions with Australian peers.

Sometimes we have communication problems with the Australians here. It is not the problem of language … it is the culture thing. It’s the culture … . (Hong Kong girl, 15 years old)

Problematically, terms like ‘Asian’ and ‘Australian’ rely on taken for granted forms of identification that disregard intercultural parallels, take national differences for granted, homogenize ‘Asian-ness’ and ‘Australian-ness’ and thereby prompt either ‘Asian’ or ‘Australian’ identifications. Such identifications do not facilitate the critical and ironic distancing necessary to interrogate nationalism. The comment of a Year 12 Japanese boy, who observed that the term ‘international student’ was problematic because it served as a dividing practice to separate ‘Asian’ outsiders from the broader
school community, suggests to us that international students may have good reasons for challenging traditional identity categories.

Against a background of disconnections and disassociations between Australian and international students, international education is also facilitating unexpected links between diverse nationalities of international students. When Japanese young people have the opportunity to befriend Korean heritage students and Taiwanese students can meet those from mainland China, the potential to challenge nation-centred, ethnic socializations is enhanced.

Students of different national and ethnic groups did not automatically defer to Western cultural preferences. Many Chinese students preferred Chinese pop music, movies and novels, while Korean, Vietnamese, Indonesian and Chinese students identified a marked preference for their ethnic cuisines. Indeed, their immersion in Western culture appeared to reinforce rather than subjugate these tastes, suggesting that the international student experience is as likely to highlight and entrench ethnocultural and national tastes and sensibilities as to promote appreciation of different cultural and national perspectives. The desire for Western education does not necessarily imply that people are entirely under the sway of global hegemonic practices, for it is possible that Western knowledge may be desired at the same time as it is despised (Tsolidis, 2001). It may well be the case, as discussed in more detail below, that Western education is simply a pragmatic means of minimizing global forms of disadvantage.

Like the ‘flexible citizens’ described in Ong’s (1998) study of middle class Chinese migrants, international students use material and symbolic resources to position themselves to maximize advantages under circumstances where choices constitute and straddle economic, national and geopolitical power dynamics. As is the case with many local students, international students are preparing themselves for professional careers desirable in the global marketplace where an English-based education provides a comparative employment advantage. Some students seek university entrance due to the shortage of tertiary places at home, but others may be seeking a liberal humanist education and escape from the highly competitive and instrumentalist education system at home (where they may be more likely to fail).

Pragmatic instrumentalism was clearly evident in the aspirations of many students who were keenly aware not only of the benefits of acquiring an English-speaking education, but also of the need to blend in and mix with local students to improve their language skills. However, other students recognized and appreciated the opportunity to engage in mutual interactions and exchanges of different understandings, world views and experiences:

And so, I try to blend in with Australian students because in Australia their knowledge is more than mine, and I try to get help from them, and we exchange information with each other. I also be with my Taiwan friend too, because we communicate fluently; we can talk about more things. (Taiwanese girl, 16 years old)

Many students spoke of their lack of social contact with local students. Evidently the close proximity of local and international students does not automatically launch
intercultural contact or harmony. Importantly, the desire for greater social interaction, cultural exchanges and understanding is often thwarted by local students. One student noted: ‘some students want to know more about international students, but not all’.

Another student offered a more familiar scenario of events:

Sometimes the Australian students use some bad language on us like ‘fuck’ etc., when this happens, we do not respond, we just sit back, because if we complain, the school leaders and teachers will claim that we are the offender and not the Australian students. And sometimes when the international student offend once, the school leaders will say I give you two weeks, one week we will send you back to China, one week … . How about the Australian students who always smoke in the toilet? And they are always in their school uniforms when smoking. But the teachers find Chinese student smoking after school or out of the school and without school uniforms, says—it is really not fair for us. (Chinese girl, 18 years old)

Her understanding of racial taunts, abuse and ensuing institutional inaction serves as a constant reminder that international students are ‘external others’ who are more likely to be disciplined and excluded for misbehaviour. Like other minority students they may come to regard themselves as highly visible targets and resent the invisibility of Anglo-white insiders (Essed, 1990; Matthews, 1996). Clearly, students do not experience schools as culturally dispassionate institutional spaces (Matthews, 1996, 1997, 2002a; Vasta & Castles, 1996, Hollinsworth, 1998) but as sites of racialization, prejudice and racism, as this next set of comments suggest:

I hope to meet friends here, not more rubbish words from Australia people. (Chinese boy, 19 years old)

What is bad about Australia is that … most of the Australian people can be racist…. (Vietnamese boy, 16 years old)

These narratives cast some doubt about the actual nature of transnational connectivity in schools and reinforce Matthews’ (1997, 2002a) and Shain’s (2003) findings that restricted social relations and racially coded social spaces are strategies employed by Asian minority high school students to protect themselves from racism. For some international students mixing with Australian students was a way of guarding against potential enmity (‘getting troubles’):

I think we should be more peaceful and friendly to each other. As we come from different culture, we hope to experience friendship here and not getting troubles. (Chinese boy, 19 years old)

Our findings also mirror earlier research into intercultural relations on Australian university campuses where intercultural associations were the exception rather than the rule. Subtle exclusions, such as the refusal by local students to participate in group work with international students and ‘in jokes’, can leave international students feeling insecure and prompt them to work harder and be better. Whether due to insensitivity, indifference, hostility or poor social skills, the outcome is student clustering (Neasdale & Todd, 1993; Smart et al., 2000). International students, like other minority students, are often aware that they are stereotyped as serious, studious and
uninterested in social interactions. However, they point to a range of pragmatic reasons, such as studying in another language, financial investment in education, parental sacrifice and scholarship obligations, as reasons why they end up reinforcing this stereotype (Matthews, 2002a,c).

We regard the intensification of nation-centred identities to be an unintended consequence of the peripheral contact between international students and their Anglo-Australian peers. However, while marginalization from the wider community is of concern because it may breed new and often unwelcome national, ethnic and religious fundamentalisms (Kenway & Bullen, 2003), it also has a ‘productive’ dimension in that it provides the opportunity for instrumentally valuable and intrinsically comforting social relations:

N1: Yes, we always sit together with international students because I think ....

N2: Sitting together with international students is good for us to understand our teachers’ language, which is English. And students usually have fun with international student. Actually we can talk our own language Mandarin but usually to communicate with each other.

N3: Why we always sit next to international students, we learn lessons, because some Australian students have different languages, and can’t translate the teacher’s language to you, so I always sit near the international students.

Conclusion

Our objective in this paper was to stimulate thinking about the often unquestioned links between globalisation, international education and the development of globally oriented citenzships and subjectivities. We used the experiences of international students in two Australian state (government) schools as foci of our investigation. The findings of our exploratory study would appear to suggest that international students do not experience Australian schools as sites for sponsoring new forms of global subjectivity and imagination.

In the Australian context, neo-liberal expressions of globalisation have authored an international education industry which is largely commercial, self-interested and, by default, imperializing. Globalisation discourse is hegemonic in international education as elsewhere (Levin, 1998; Clyne et al., 2001). Discussions of internationalization in higher education literature are often disengaged from engagement with long-standing debates in the field of comparative education and multicultural and anti-racist education. The absence of these engagements may be traced to the predominantly economic imperatives which have driven practices of internationalization in both the higher education and latterly in secondary education contexts. Following Beck’s (2004) call for a ‘cosmopolitanization of the social sciences’, we suggest that the methodologies currently in place to study globalisation require refinement if they are to explain how global, national and local level forces shape educational practices and the experiences of international students.

In spite of its initiation as a panacea for cash-strapped educational intuitions, we believe that international education can and should create conditions of possibility for
the formation of globally oriented subjectivities which are informed by a broad-based cosmopolitan virtue. Changing the processes and practices of international education is not just a matter of working out how schools enrolling international students might do things differently in curricula, pedagogy and educational structures. It also means moving beyond ‘third way fantasies’ to recognize the limitations imposed by an increasingly universal doctrine of neo-liberalism (Venn, 2002, p. 72). Markets do not nurture a concern for social justice nor solve pressing global problems such as environmental degradation, growing inequality, unsustainable economic development and instability (Held, 2001). Marketized expressions of international education are ultimately disengaged from notions of a global public good.

To effect an alternative international education requires educators to bypass traditional ways of imagining and constructing the other which have informed nation states like Australia. Crucially, it requires teachers to understand international education as something more than the means to competitive advantage in international trade markets. These understandings are vital if we are to avoid embracing old nationalisms and patriarchies and generating new ones. Intercultural sensitivities, including identification with a global community are important preconditions for effective participation in 21st century civic life.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Annette Woods and two anonymous referees for their constructive comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

Notes

1. Challenging the idea that love of one’s country (patriotism) is an anthema to cosmopolitanism, Turner (2002) distinguishes it from respect for the state (nationalism) and argues that while these have been collapsed in the modernist enterprise, the virtues of cosmopolitanism promoted by the Stoic tradition of Rome regarded love of country as quite compatible with love of humanity (cosmopolitanism).

2. According to Levin (1998) economist education policies converge around six main orthodoxies: (1) education sustains economic success and competition; (2) despite previous high levels of funding schools have failed; (3) education reforms are necessary but more funding is not; (4) school-based management schemes improve school performance because parents and communities know best; (5) schools produce commodities and consumer choice creates diversity and improves schools; (6) national standards, accountability criterion and large-scale testing improve schooling.

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