Intercultural Teaching Competencies as a Response to Teacher Role Stress and Student Existential Stress

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Abstract: *Schools worldwide are increasingly expected to promote intercultural understanding as a foundation for social cohesion. In Australia, while the curriculum aspires to foster respect for diversity and civic responsibility, its implementation often falls short, with reports of exclusion and racism undermining students' sense of belonging. This study explores how developing intercultural teaching competencies can help reduce both teacher role stress and student existential stress in culturally diverse classrooms. Drawing on a scoping review of recent literature, it identifies key teaching competencies-curriculum design, facilitative teaching, reflective practice, and inclusive learning cultures-that promote social cohesion. The paper situates these competencies within broader psychosocial challenges and offers strategies that not only enhance intercultural understanding but also support teacher wellbeing and student identity development. It calls for policy alignment, targeted teacher training, and school-wide support to make intercultural education more effective and sustainable.*

Keywords: intercultural competence, role stress, existential stress, social cohesion, secondary education

1. Introduction

Internationally, schools are increasingly called upon to promote intercultural understanding as a foundation for social cohesion in increasingly diverse societies. In a globalised world, classrooms reflect a mosaic of cultures, languages, and worldviews, creating both opportunities and challenges for teachers and learners. Within the Australian context, intercultural understanding is embedded as a general capability across the national curriculum. The curriculum seeks to equip students with the skills to value diversity, engage respectfully with others, and develop a sense of civic responsibility in a multicultural democracy. However, translating these aspirations into practice is not without difficulties. Despite policy intentions, implementation often falls short, with recurring reports of systemic racism, cultural stereotyping, and exclusion which undermines students' sense of belonging and participation in schools (Rowan et al., 2021; Blackmore et al., 2024).

Scholarly research consistently demonstrates that students' intercultural understanding develops most effectively when teachers display strong intercultural competencies. These include knowledge of culturally diverse content, the ability to design inclusive curricula, the skills to facilitate respectful dialogue, and the disposition to critically reflect on one's own cultural positioning (Busse & Krause, 2015; Dimitrov & Haque, 2016). Teachers who engage with intercultural pedagogy not only enhance classroom inclusivity but also strengthen students' empathy, critical thinking, and respect for diversity. However, many educators face considerable challenges in enacting intercultural competencies. Teachers frequently report experiencing *role stress*, a concept widely discussed in organisational psychology and educational research. Role stress manifests in three main forms: *role conflict*, where teachers struggle to balance curriculum

coverage with inclusive practices; *role overload*, arising from the time and energy required to address diverse learning needs; and *role ambiguity*, reflecting uncertainty about expectations and the absence of clear guidelines for intercultural pedagogy (Merida et al., 2017).

While teacher stress has been extensively studied in relation to workload and accountability pressures, less attention has been given to the intercultural dimensions of role stress. Yet, this stress is highly relevant because teachers often feel unprepared or unsupported when delivering intercultural education, despite being held accountable for its outcomes. The lack of systemic guidance and adequate professional learning opportunities contributes to a sense of professional vulnerability and frustration, which may undermine teachers' willingness to engage with intercultural pedagogy.

Equally significant are the challenges faced by students, particularly those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Many of these students experience existential stress in school contexts, which arises when their sense of belonging, identity, or meaning is threatened (Kaur, 2025). For international students or newly arrived migrants, this stress can be particularly acute as they attempt to navigate unfamiliar cultural norms, adapt to new academic expectations, and establish meaningful peer relationships. Even local students, when confronted with cultural differences, may grapple with existential tensions as they question their own assumptions and values. If left unaddressed, such stress can contribute to alienation, disengagement, and poor educational outcomes. Conversely, when teachers employ strategies that affirm students' identities and promote dialogue, existential stress can be transformed into opportunities for growth, resilience, and intercultural competence.

Thus, there is a pressing need to examine which teaching competencies best equip teachers to navigate these dual

challenges of role stress and existential stress while fostering intercultural understanding. This study responds to that need by conducting a scoping review of recent literature to identify the teaching competencies essential for enhancing students' intercultural understanding. In doing so, it situates the discussion within broader psychosocial dynamics of teaching and learning, recognising that intercultural pedagogy is not merely a technical skillset but also an emotional and existential endeavour. By explicitly linking teacher role stress and student existential stress with intercultural competencies, this paper offers a novel contribution to educational research and practice. It argues that strengthening teacher capacity in this domain has the potential not only to improve intercultural learning but also to support teacher wellbeing and student belonging, key pillars of socially cohesive schooling in contemporary Australia.

2. Methodology

The current inquiry seeks to examine relevant studies to highlight evidence-based teaching competencies with the potential to promote transformative learning pedagogies. While the focus is primarily on competencies, the review also considers pedagogical approaches that emerged during analysis as influential in fostering social cohesion. This expansion was not part of the initial inquiry plan but was added after reflecting on roundtable discussions and unit learning. Importantly, this study situates teaching competencies within the broader psychosocial challenges of *role stress* (for teachers) and *existential stress* (for students), recognising that these factors often shape how intercultural strategies are enacted and received. This section outlines the research design, data collection procedures, and data analysis.

2.1 Research Design

The scoping review method, if structured and executed rigorously, has strong potential to inform both educational research and policy (Munn et al., 2018). While a scoping review does not aim to answer narrowly defined research questions, it plays a vital role in identifying, mapping, and analysing themes across a broad evidence base. This approach is well-suited for studying the complex intersections of pedagogy, teacher workload, and student identity

Incorporating the lens of role stress and existential stress into the review adds further relevance. Teachers often experience role conflict, overload, or ambiguity when required to address intercultural capabilities alongside curriculum demands, while students may face identity-based challenges or existential uncertainties when negotiating diverse cultural environments. A scoping review is therefore well-suited to mapping not only which competencies are recommended, but also how these competencies might mitigate stressors that inhibit effective learning and teaching.

This methodological approach aligns with recent studies. For instance, Ramstrand et al. (2024) used a scoping review to identify pedagogical interventions that improved intercultural competence in higher education. Similarly, Fray and Gore (2018) applied scoping review techniques to investigate motivations for entering the teaching profession. These studies demonstrate how scoping reviews can reveal

underlying social and psychological dynamics in education, which this study extends to the concepts of role stress and existential stress.

2.2 Data Collection

Stage 1 – Identifying relevant studies
Searches were conducted in Scopus, SAGE, Google Scholar, and Web of Science (WoS) for the period January 2013 to May 2025. Boolean operators were used to combine terms such as *teaching competencies*, *intercultural competence*, *intercultural understanding*, and *school education*. Initial searches with individual terms such as *teaching competency* or *intercultural competence* returned broad results, many outside the scope of this inquiry. Therefore, combinations of terms were applied to refine the dataset.

Stage 2 – Study selection
The search began with Scopus, where studies were first filtered by English-language publications within the target timeframe. Articles with empirical findings—whether qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods—were included. Eligible sources ranged from peer-reviewed journal articles to theses and reports, provided findings were clearly reported. Studies outside educational contexts were excluded. Titles and abstracts were screened for relevance, followed by full-text reviews to confirm eligibility. Duplicate studies across databases were removed.

The review included studies examining teaching competencies alongside challenges like student identity, workload, or classroom diversity. This broader framing ensured that findings relevant to *role stress* and *existential stress* could be captured. For instance, studies exploring teachers' feelings of unpreparedness in addressing cultural diversity, or students' sense of exclusion in classrooms, were included even if they were not explicitly labelled as stress research.

2.3 Data Analysis

The studies selected for this scoping review were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), a flexible method for identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning across a dataset. While thematic analysis is sometimes used interchangeably with content analysis in both qualitative and quantitative studies, its distinctive strength lies in bridging different forms of evidence by drawing attention to participants' lived experiences and the broader social contexts in which these are situated (Terry et al., 2017).

A central feature of RTA is its emphasis on researcher subjectivity, acknowledging that the researcher's positionality, reflexivity, and interpretive lens shape the analytic process. In this study, the use of RTA allowed for embedding these interpretive dimensions into the analysis, which was particularly valuable given the inquiry's focus on intercultural understanding, social cohesion, and the psychosocial challenges associated with teacher role stress and student existential stress. By allowing the researcher to engage critically with patterns in the literature, RTA supported the identification of themes that illuminate how

teaching competencies can either exacerbate or alleviate these stressors.

The process involved familiarisation with the studies, generating initial codes, identifying themes, and refining these themes through repeated engagement with the literature. This iterative process ensured that the analysis did not simply summarise findings but critically interrogated how they contribute to knowledge about intercultural pedagogy. In particular, themes such as curriculum design, instructional strategies, reflective practice, and school-wide support cultures emerged as key teaching competencies. Each theme was then interpreted in relation to its potential to mitigate

teachers' role conflict, overload, or ambiguity, as well as to address students' identity struggles and existential challenges in diverse classrooms.

The analytic process followed Braun et al. (2023) in five iterative phases: (i) familiarisation with the studies, (ii) generation of preliminary codes, (iii) clustering of codes into potential themes, (iv) reviewing themes against the dataset, and (v) refining and naming themes. This process moved the analysis beyond description, towards an interpretive account of how teacher competencies both influence and are influenced by the tensions of working in culturally diverse classrooms.

Table 1: Brief description of the selected articles.

Sr. No.	In-text reference & *Location*	Key findings
1.	Abdulah and Mahmud (2025). *Malaysia*	Key teaching competencies: - • Content mastery skills • Flexible strategies and techniques • Technology utilisation • Classroom management • Assessment and monitoring
2.	Leung and Hue (2020). *Hongkong*	• Developing multicultural-training programs. • Teacher's knowledge and skills to influence teacher-student relationships
3.	Yusof et al. (2019). *Malaysia*	Teachers need: - • Teaching and learning strategies • Teacher and student communication • Teacher's professionalism value • Technology skills.
4.	Kang and Jun (2017). *South Korea*	• Intercultural sensitivity • Multicultural acceptability • Teachers' exposure to multicultural situations. • Teacher-centred learning cultures, school policy, education reform, and financial and human resource
5.	Brzosko-Barratt et al. (2025). *Europe*	• Teachers need to develop self-awareness and self-reflexivity to develop cultural identities.
6.	Lee et al. (2022). *USA & South Korea*	Teaching competencies: - • Teaching and self-reflection • Attitude • Content knowledge • Teaching skills and strategies
7.	Batanero et al. (2021). *Spain*	• Awareness, attitude and strategies towards work • Training for teachers • Social justice, equality and fairness at school
8.	Sharma (2015) *India*	Being competent in planning, evaluation & managerial aspect of teaching competencies
9.	Dimitrov and Haque (2016). *Canada*	• Foundational competencies: - Ability to reflect own intercultural awareness. • Facilitate competencies: - Instructional skills necessary to facilitate active learning. • Curriculum design competencies: - Aligning curriculum with learning activities and assessments.
10.	Blackmore et al., 2024 Australia	• Intercultural relations between international and domestic students • Australian schools • analyses intercultural relations between domestic and international students in the context of policies promoting "internationalisation-at-home"
11.	Rowan et al., 2021 Australia	• International students • Secondary Schooling • Australian schools • significant role that online activity played in helping students deal with feelings of disconnect and exclusion.
12.	Kaur, 2025 Australia	• Existential stress in adolescents • Secondary Schooling • Australian schools • Adolescents in year 9 and 10 reporting higher levels of existential stress
13.	Mireda et al, 2017 Spain	• Role stress in teachers • Three hundred and thirty-six Spanish teachers

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		• Role ambiguity and role conflict were positively related to depression, anxiety and stress symptoms.
14.	Carroll et al., 2022 Australia	• Role stress in teachers • Over half of the sample reported being very or extremely stressed and were considering leaving the profession, with early career teachers, primary teachers, and teachers working in rural and remote areas reporting the highest stress and burnout levels.

3. Findings and Discussion

Four major themes emerged from the analysis: **(1) Content Knowledge and Curriculum Design, (2) Instructive and Facilitative Teaching, (3) Reflective and Professional Identity Development, and (4) Supportive and Interculturally Aligned Learning Cultures**. Each theme is discussed below, with explicit attention to its relationship with teacher role stress and student existential stress.

3.1 Themes

1) Content Knowledge and Curriculum Design
Thorough content knowledge and strong understanding of the subject are the foundational elements of teaching competencies in an intercultural context (Abdulah & Mahmud, 2025). Teachers require strong subject knowledge and curriculum design skills to integrate culturally diverse perspectives (Dimitrov & Haque, 2016). This teaching competency encompasses the teacher's ability to align the curriculum's learning materials, assessment methods, and learning outcomes, using technology and subject expertise, in such a way as to allow students to respect different perspectives by exploring differences and demonstrating intercultural skills (Lee et al., 2022). For teachers, this mitigates role stress by reducing ambiguity about how to operationalise intercultural content. For students, inclusive curriculum reduces existential stress by affirming identity and belonging (Kaur, 2025).

2) Instructive and Facilitative Teaching
Teaching competency through the lens of students' intercultural understanding relies heavily on teachers' instructional skills to recognise learners' needs based on their culture and background, and facilitative skills to encourage active learning of diverse learners (Dimitrov & Haque, 2016). It includes employing alternative ways of explicit instructions and assessment methods to scaffold students' learning. Teachers must show patience and recognise cultural differences in managing classroom interruptions to facilitate discussions (Dimitrov & Haque, 2016). Implementing strategies like cooperative learning, peer – teaching, and role-plays can facilitate such socially cohesive discourses (Leung & Hue, 2020). Teachers should avoid jargon and use simple language that all students can comprehend and must develop positive relationships with students by communicating with respect and empathy and building trust through dialogue and active listening. Kang and Jun (2017) emphasised that teachers have intercultural sensitivity and multicultural acceptability to recognise cultural equality and develop efficient communication in the classroom. However, these practices often heighten teacher role overload given the time-intensive nature of planning and monitoring diverse needs. Yet, when enacted successfully, they create dialogical spaces that reduce students' existential stress by fostering empathy and recognition across differences.

3) Reflective and Professional Identity Development
Culturally competent teachers engage in ongoing self-reflection to examine their own intercultural awareness (Leet et al., 2022). This ability of self-awareness, which is also called 'self-reflexivity', allows teachers to reflect on how their cultural identity interacts with students' cultures and how they are perceived by cultural others (Dimitrov & Haque, 2016). Reflective teachers critically evaluate their classroom's intercultural situation and encourage students to expect diversity of opinions and accept different perspectives (Brzosko-Barratt et al., 2025).

"Teachers' emotional regulation and behavioral adjustments in multicultural situations improve their multicultural teaching competency" (Kang & Jun, 2017, p. 2342). This reflective practice is linked to professional identity development but can also intensify role conflict as teachers reconcile personal beliefs with institutional expectations (Carroll et al., 2022). At the same time, students observing such reflection are better able to navigate identity-related tensions, thereby alleviating existential stress (Kaur, 2025). Therefore, teachers must obtain this exposure by their continuous engagement in professional learning and professional development activities focussed on intercultural understanding and diversity.

4) Supportive and Interculturally Aligned Learning Cultures
Supportive and interculturally aligned learning cultures are characterised by a shared commitment to promoting equity, social justice, and cohesion to a classroom (Batanero et al., 2021). Teachers must be empowered and enabled by supportive school policies and education reforms, professional learning opportunities and educational resources to improve their ability to model intercultural competencies for students (Kang & Jun, 2017).

Strong leadership with a positive attitude that allocates human and financial resources and employs culturally responsive assessment and monitoring methods to assess intercultural understanding, is the main pillar of the supportive learning culture.
School-wide cultures that value equity, justice, and inclusion empower teachers and buffer against role stress (Merida et al., 2017). Without systemic support, teachers risk burnout when expected to carry intercultural responsibilities alone (Carroll et al., 2022). Supportive policies, leadership, and resources enable sustainable practice. For students, such cultures provide community, reducing isolation and the existential stress of cultural marginalisation.

3.2 Conceptual Model

The following model illustrates the relationships between teaching competencies, role stress, existential stress, intercultural understanding, and social cohesion.
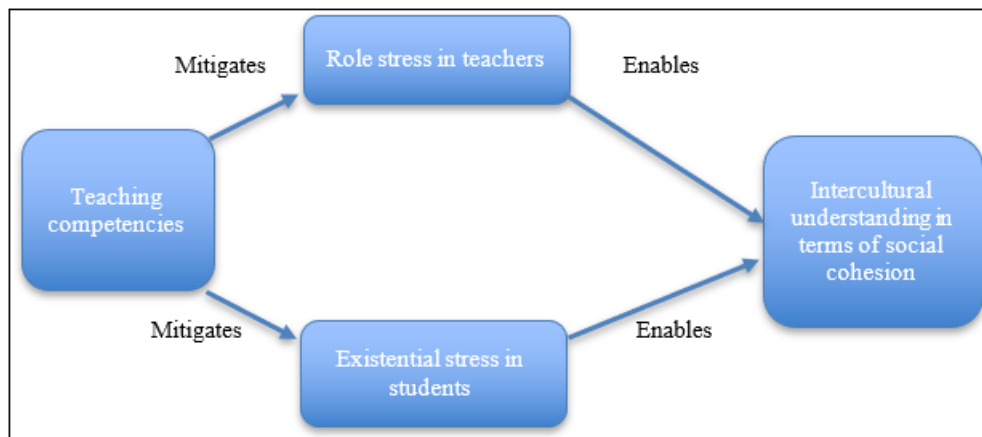
Figure 1

3.3 Suggested Teaching Strategies

Students in a culturally diverse classroom bring varied knowledge and experiences from their cultural and personal background (Batanero et al., 2021). Therefore, multiple strategies are required to develop their intercultural understanding. This section highlights three such teaching strategies, drawn on the findings discussed above and researchers' professional experience.

a) *Learning tailored to you*:

Differentiated teaching and assessment acknowledge classroom diversity by designing a student-centred curriculum that integrates culturally diverse perspectives (Qorib, 2024). Being mindful of cultural differences, student expectations, and preferred learning approaches enables teachers to scaffold learning effectively. To do this, thorough content knowledge is a crucial teaching competency (Abdulah & Mahmud, 2025).

From a stress perspective, differentiation can initially contribute to teacher role stress through increased workload and the demand to balance curriculum coverage with diverse learner needs. However, effective planning reduces *role ambiguity* by providing a clear framework for addressing diversity. For students, personalised learning alleviates existential stress by affirming their cultural identity and making them feel valued within the classroom community.

Example: Teacher could pre-assess students' prior knowledge to better understand the perspectives they bring. This reduces teacher uncertainty about where to begin (role clarity) and affirms students' sense of belonging. Bilingual resources can further reduce students' existential stress by validating their linguistic and cultural identities (Kaur. 2025).

b) *I can see through your eyes*

Encouraging students to engage in learning through multiple perspectives fosters empathy and intercultural understanding. Critical evaluation of topics through strengths and weaknesses nurtures openness to alternative explanations (Busse & Krause, 2015).

For teachers, facilitating debates, role-plays, or simulations may generate *role overload*, as these activities are time-intensive and require managing competing classroom demands. However, they also provide a pathway for reducing *role conflict*, as such strategies directly align with curriculum goals of fostering civic awareness. For students, these dialogic methods alleviate existential stress by helping them make sense of conflicting cultural narratives and by validating that their voices matter.

Example: A classroom debate on compulsory education from Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives encourages students to confront multiple viewpoints. This promotes empathy and respect while helping students resolve existential tensions around identity, fairness, and inclusion.

c) *Effective communication and relations*

Intercultural sensitivity and multicultural acceptability are key features of culturally competent teaching (Kang & Jun, 2017). Creating opportunities for students to learn from each other reduces barriers and fosters mutual respect (Busse & Krause, 2015).

For teachers, the challenge of sustaining equitable classroom dialogue may contribute to role conflict—balancing authority with facilitation of student voice. With systemic support, however, such strategies reduce role stress by aligning teaching practices with intercultural goals. For students, cooperative learning reduces existential stress by shifting from isolation to connection, affirming that they belong in the classroom community (Kaur, 2025).

Example: Structured peer-learning activities such as cooperative projects or think-pair-share tasks allow students to engage in respectful interactions. For international students, this lessens existential stress by providing safe spaces for contribution, while for teachers it clarifies their role as facilitator rather than sole knowledge provider.

3.4 Implications

This study highlights that teaching competencies cannot be separated from the psychosocial contexts in which they are enacted. Teachers' role stress and students' existential stress act as barriers to intercultural understanding unless deliberately addressed through policy and pedagogy. Three key implications emerge:

1) Policy: Teacher workload, professional learning, and intercultural expectations must be aligned to reduce role stress. Policies should integrate intercultural competence

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training into teacher accreditation and ongoing development.

2) Practice: Teachers should employ dialogic, reflective, and student-centred strategies that mitigate existential stress by fostering belonging and identity affirmation. Co-design activities with students and families can bridge cultural divides.

3) Research: Future inquiry should empirically investigate the links between intercultural pedagogy, teacher role stress, and student existential stress. Mixed-methods approaches could reveal how stress factors mediate learning outcomes in diverse classrooms.

3.5 Limitations

The study is limited by the relative scarcity of literature explicitly connecting intercultural teaching competencies to stress frameworks, particularly in Australian school contexts. As a result, the links between teaching competencies, role stress, and existential stress are partly interpretive, synthesised through thematic analysis of studies that describe related challenges under different terms. Furthermore, the scoping review relies exclusively on secondary data, without collecting new empirical evidence. Future research could address this gap by engaging teachers and students directly to understand how intercultural competencies are perceived to alleviate stress and promote social cohesion in practice.

4. Conclusion

Strengthening intercultural teaching competencies is vital not only for fostering social cohesion but also for addressing the hidden stressors that undermine effective teaching and learning. This study has argued that intercultural pedagogy should be understood through the dual lenses of role stress and existential stress, providing a more comprehensive view of the challenges and opportunities in diverse classrooms. Teachers frequently face role conflict, overload, and ambiguity when implementing intercultural practices alongside curriculum demands. Without systemic support, these pressures risk diminishing teacher wellbeing and weakening the quality of instruction. By equipping teachers with strong competencies in curriculum design, facilitative pedagogy, reflective practice, and collaborative school cultures, education systems can reduce these forms of role stress and create conditions where teachers can thrive.

Equally, students in culturally diverse classrooms often confront existential stress as they negotiate issues of identity, belonging, and meaning. Inclusive teaching strategies, when deliberately applied, can transform these stressors into opportunities for growth, helping students to develop resilience, empathy, and intercultural understanding. Thus, the enhancement of intercultural competencies is not a peripheral goal but a pedagogical and psychosocial imperative. Ultimately, embedding these competencies into policy, teacher education, and classroom practice is essential for building cohesive, equitable, and future-ready learning environments.

4.1 Critical Connection of Policy Recommendations with Existing Frameworks

1) Embed Intercultural Competence in Teacher Accreditation

Current accreditation standards, such as the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers [AITSL], reference diversity through descriptors like *"understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to promote reconciliation"* (1.4, 2.4) and *"differentiate teaching to meet the specific learning needs of students"* (1.5). However, intercultural competence is not explicitly mandated as a core capability across all teacher levels. Embedding intercultural understanding systematically into accreditation would address this gap by reducing role ambiguity, making expectations clearer for teachers. Without this integration, intercultural pedagogy risks being treated as peripheral rather than central to professional identity.

2) Invest in Professional Learning and Support Systems

While state and territory systems provide professional learning modules (e.g., the AITSL Professional Learning Toolkit and ACARA resources), intercultural pedagogy is often under-represented or delivered as short, one-off workshops. These fail to provide sustained capacity-building, contributing to role overload when teachers are left to independently design inclusive practices. Funded, ongoing programs, coupled with mentoring and peer collaboration, would align more closely with the Australian Government's Multicultural Education Policy aims but go beyond its largely aspirational commitments by providing tangible workload support.

3) Align Workload and Curriculum Expectations

The Australian Curriculum v9.0 embeds intercultural understanding as a general capability but does not allocate specific time or resources for its delivery, leaving teachers to integrate it alongside crowded subject content. This mismatch creates role conflict, as teachers balance mandated outcomes with broader civic aims. Policy alignment is therefore needed to adjust workload and timetable flexibility, ensuring that intercultural learning is not sidelined. Without this, systemic pressures undermine teachers' ability to enact intercultural pedagogy effectively, despite curriculum requirements.

4) Promote Inclusive and Whole-School Cultures

Equity and inclusion are recognised priorities in policies such as the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (2008) and its successor, the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (2019). These call for valuing diversity and promoting cohesion. However, implementation is inconsistent, and school-level practice often falls short, leaving students vulnerable to existential stress through exclusion or marginalisation. Promoting co-designed initiatives with communities and embedding intercultural events within school policies would make these aspirations actionable. Such strategies transform policy rhetoric into lived experiences of belonging for students, ensuring that systemic commitments align with classroom realities.

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