

Representing trauma in the curriculum:

Coming to terms with the substance and significance of the Stolen Generations

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## **Abstract**

Stories from the Stolen Generations in Australia have formed an integral part of the curriculum in Australian schools for many years. It is a requirement of the Australian Curriculum that teachers in both primary and secondary schools include this 'difficult knowledge' in their programs. The approach taken is not complicated. The teaching usually focuses on history and the enactment of government policy.

However, questions of what allows human carers and foster parents to commit such hideous acts upon children are rarely addressed. Comments such as 'we did the Stolen Generations at school' highlight the dilemmas of teaching the unrepresentable. This was brought into focus when Ivan Clarke spoke with a group of students enrolled in a teacher education program.

When Ivan spoke to these students about his own experiences of being taken, it was an overwhelming time for all of us, a highly emotional and even traumatic experience leading some students to remark: 'we did the stolen generations at school but it was nothing like that!' Following the lecture, students spoke about themselves as much as about Ivan's experiences. There was what Judith Butler calls a 'shared precariousness'. This paper explores the nature of 'shared precariousness' in the context of a teacher education program in Australia.



## Teaching about the experiences of trauma

Stories from the Stolen Generations in Australia have formed an integral part of the curriculum in Australian schools for many years. It is a requirement of the Australian Curriculum that teachers in both primary and secondary schools include this 'difficult knowledge' in their programs. The approach taken is not complicated. The teaching usually focuses on history (as it was then) and the enactment of government policy. The past is accommodated in the minds of teachers and students (Harrison, 2013, Clarke, 2008).

But in the case of the Stolen Generations, the past does not go away. This was brought into focus recently when Ivan Clarke spoke with a group of students enrolled in a teacher education program. When Ivan spoke to these students about his own experiences of being taken, it was an overwhelming time for us all, a highly emotional and even traumatic experience leading some students to remark: 'we did the stolen generations at school but it was nothing like that!' Following the lecture, students spoke about themselves as much as about Ivan's experiences. There was what Judith Butler calls a 'shared precariousness', a state of exposure Levinas (1999) would say. We wanted to know more about how these students were affected by Ivan's lecture: what is the meaning and significance of these student encounters with the Stolen Generations? We wanted to know what Ivan's story was *doing* to students. The trauma insists in the history of Australia and in school classrooms, but students often 'close down' when the history arrives. Talk of trauma often invokes an incapacity to retrieve the past (Clough, 2007).

Questions of what allows human carers and foster parents to commit hideous acts upon children are rarely addressed. Questions of how schools and teachers work with children who have experienced trauma are usually left to the appropriate child welfare agencies. However, the curriculum does require teachers to address 'history'. Comments such as 'we did the Stolen Generations at school' highlight the dilemmas of teaching the unrepresentable. There is a need to move the current pedagogy beyond the clichéd accounts of what happened to the Stolen Generations, perhaps to a place where we get to see the faces of those who were taken, and to know their personal histories and families.

Sharon Todd (2003) would suggest that the students at Ivan's lecture are simply eliding differences into sameness. But Roger Simon (2011b, p. 446) sum-ups the dilemma as, 'Contemporary ethics would have us attempt to guard against reducing another's suffering to imaginative or quite real versions of our own, by critically attending to the inescapable failure of comprehension that is always a component of ethical witness.' He points to an ethical responsibility to respond to a failure of comprehension.

What was I trying to do in asking a member of the Stolen Generations to speak with students enrolled in a unit in Aboriginal education? I was conscious of dealing with indifference, a position often filled by the student propped up in the university lecture theatre waiting for the performance. Shocking students out of their passive complicity (Massumi, 2002) with a past that cannot be forgotten seemed like a 'useful' approach to getting students to understand the stories that they have apparently heard so many times before ('we've done the Stolen Generations'). Farley (2009, p. 543) draws on Winnicott to highlight that 'the pedagogical aim to "disillusion others" may be the biggest illusion of them all' adding that 'for when we emphasize the promise of reason and progress through education, what is forgotten is its underside: the conflicts, passions, anxieties and uncertainties that fuel questions in the first place.' (2009, p. 550). Perhaps we are commonly running from an unbearable past that continues to persist in the present. My goal was to make Ivan's life visible to students, in the context of a school education where previously, students had failed to comprehend the experiences of the Stolen Generations (and the Jewish holocaust, the World Wars, Vietnam, domestic violence, and so forth).

Cassidy & Clarke-Vivier (2016, p. 14) argue that 'it is imperative that teachers and students acknowledge difficult knowledge, and by doing so, relinquish their subject positions, and re-enter the curricular space as vulnerable individuals'. Simon & Eppert (1997, p. 189) add though, the 'attendant risk is that this work is too difficult for an individual to undertake alone and thus silence or indifference may be the resulting pedagogical stance'. Therefore, the pedagogy must be conceived as a practice in community with others, as bearing witness with others. Roger Simon (2011a) calls this 'an open community of witnesses'. Butler (2004, p. 30) would like to know what would allow these students to encounter the 'unbearability' of the past.

The difficulty of the knowledge is not in the story itself, it is in the student's encounter with the person telling the story. Judith Butler (2010, p. 96) notes the power of narrative to make us understand (and to mobilise us), to keep the past in the present. Nevertheless, Butler looks at why some of these encounters are traumatic, yet others are not. How do we learn to abstain from the unbearable experiences of others, and even from our own? Butler investigates why do we grieve for some, but not for others.

The genius of Ivan's pedagogy is the story itself – as the presence of emotional affect that creates a relation, rather than meaning. He is not passing-on knowledge. He is not asking students to understand, or to feel guilt. As we hear Ivan's story, an interrelation alters the ecology of learning where students feel less separated from Ivan. There is a vulnerability in Ivan's life, and we all witness that, clearly. We also witness an unrepresentable demonstration of reconciliation in Ivan's life, a reconciliation with himself, and that is a point of admiration for students and myself. But Ivan becomes visible, albeit fleetingly, when students and I recognise in Ivan's story, our own 'mutual vulnerability', disorientation and anxiety (Butler, 2010). We all feel exposed. Illusions of self-

autonomy become transparent, just for a moment as we recognise that we've been undone, that we are now as visible as Ivan. No-one is outside the frame. In these moments, according to Roger Simon (2011b, p. 434) "one's sense of mastery is undone and correspondingly one may undergo an experience that mixes partial understanding with confusion and disorientation, the certainty of another's fear and suffering with one's own diffuse anxiety and disquiet."

This paper is about learning safely, where the focus is on needing to know about trauma in education. Three interests are involved, a teacher's interest in learning and a psychologist's interest in safety combine to create processes for safe learning about traumatic experiences of others. The third interest comes from Ivan, who presents the content for our focus on teaching about the Stolen Generations.

Our aim is to establish some principals for trauma informed education in the higher education context. We focus on cultural and social modes of regulating affective and ethical responses to the teaching of difficult knowledge such as the Stolen Generations. Just how should teacher educators teach about the Stolen Generations, the holocaust, slavery, the massacres of the 19th and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in Australia, the World Wars, Gallipoli, Freedom from Hunger? These questions are raised in the wider context of how trauma informed education might escape the dilemmas of representation (and blocking out), including the oscillation of a teaching practice between the poles of 'shock' to disengagement and dissociation. We thus focus on how to move learners from affective dissonance to affective solidarity, without reinstating empty empathy, pity or sentimentalism (Zembylas, 2014). The paper will subsequently conclude with some discussion of what a domestic and family violence and trauma informed education might look like for teachers.

The article is divided into four sections. Firstly, we have suggested above that teachers have been teaching about trauma for decades, yet the intricacies of doing so have not been explicated in any detail. The next section therefore highlights some difficulties of teaching about trauma in educational settings. Thirdly, the impact of trauma on learners is defined, and this is followed by some of the previous literature on how we might teach safely about trauma. Our aim is to develop some principals of trauma informed teaching.

### **Difficulties of trauma exposure**

The diagnostic criteria for Post-traumatic Stress Disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) provides arguably the most accepted definition of what constitutes trauma. In order to receive the diagnosis, subjects must have been exposed to:

actual or threatened death, serious injury or sexual violation [occurring because the subject] directly experiences the traumatic event, witnesses the traumatic event in person, learns that the traumatic event occurred to a close family member or close friend (with the actual or threatened death being either violent or accidental), or experiences first-hand repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event (not through media, pictures, television or movies unless work-related). (American Psychiatric Association, 2013)

Whilst the process of traumatisation is subjective, it is widely accepted that a broad array of events such as serious motor vehicle accidents, natural disasters, presence in combat zones, sexual assault, many forms of violence, child abuse or neglect, sudden death of close family or friends, and sudden removal from caregivers often results in traumatisation.

With 15 million Australians affected by trauma (Phoenix Australia, n.d.), and rates of traumatisation in American university students currently estimated at 66-85% (Carello & Butler, 2013), it is pertinent to consider how the presence of traumatisation within Australian university students may interact with their effective learning about traumatic events such as massacres, domestic violence, war and The Stolen Generations.

### **Impact of trauma on student learning**

Traumatisation produces an inability to regulate arousal levels, emotions and behaviours and a construction of meaning around the traumatic experience that is maladaptive for the person's wellbeing (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Traumatised individuals endure debilitating consequences including heightened anxiety and/or anger, difficulties concentrating, sleep disruptions, changes to memory functioning and intrusive thinking about the traumatic event when this is not desired or deliberately undertaken.

There are two main risks present when teaching students about traumatic events. The first is the risk of re-traumatising an already traumatised student by teaching about traumatic content in a way that exacerbates their symptoms and hinders their recovery from traumatisation. The second is the risk of producing sub-clinical PTSD type symptoms in students who are not already traumatised (Carello & Butler, 2013). In both cases, the exposure to traumatic content produces a dysregulation of the nervous and cognitive systems. The student, in response, needs to turn their attention to regulating their system and is not able to simultaneously attend to the educational imperative in front of them. Both of these situations then result in a reduction in learning capacity and a defence against the content that they are being exposed to (Jones, 2002).

### **Interventions in the teaching about traumatic knowledge**

Deborah Britzman (1998) applies the term *difficult knowledge* to include not only the knowledge of trauma, but also the internal conflicts—anxieties and desires—that those representations set into motion. She highlights:

What makes trauma traumatic is the incapacity to respond adequately, accompanied by feelings of profound helplessness and loss, and a sense that no other person or group will intervene. What makes trauma traumatic is the loss of self and other.' (2000, p. 202).

Farley (2009, p. 542) explores the affective force of difficult knowledge and its impact on individual and collective emotional forces to highlight the loss of epistemological certainty:

What is difficult about “difficult knowledge” is that it confronts teachers with feelings of helplessness and loss, and the impossibility of undoing what has already happened. And even more, a child’s startling questions about historical trauma may lift the veil on some of the illusions that drive teaching: illusions of self-mastery, or perfect authority, or enlightenment, for instance.

Her argument is that we need to be far more certain about not making-up our minds, of residing with uncertainty. Ellsworth (2005, p. 100-101) proposes that perhaps the aim is not to understand. How do we represent acts that exceed all frames of cognition? How do the students in this case approach the unbearable? Ellsworth (2005, p. 101) notes that the aim is not to turn away from the unrepresentable and unbearable: ‘too little memory dishonours the catastrophe, but so does too much’. Britzman (2000, p. 202) came to focus on how teacher education could make itself relevant to such ethical obligations:

The work of knowing the self entails acknowledging not just what one would like to know about the self but also what is difficult to know about the self, including features we tend to project to others: aggression, self-aggrandizement, destructive wishes, and helplessness. These are the devastating qualities of psychical life.

In quoting a historian’s letter to a group of school children, Farley (2009, p. 538) reminds us that aggression and destructive wishes are not character flaws that belong to others, whether real or imagined, but rather ‘a human quality of aggression, which reached unprecedented heights and bone-chilling organization in the totalitarian context of Nazi Germany.’ Butler (2010, p. 82) meanwhile argues that any effort to reduce acts of violence to ‘individual psychological acts’ would return us to the individual as the causal matrix of these acts and events. She raises the question of how individuals are taken up by these norms of violence. Farley’s (2009) study is instructive insofar as we need to remember that the people who took the children away were not the ‘bad welfare people’, they were ordinary people, taken up by the norms of a white British society. They were (and are) ordinary Australians content to act out the shared psychic qualities of aggression, self-aggrandizement, destructive wishes, and helplessness.

The students in Ivan lecture could 'see themselves' to the extent that they share the norms of those who did the taking, and devised and oversaw a policy that allowed children to be taken. (Butler 2010, p. 99-100). They could see the frame that usually blinds them to what they see.

The policies that have facilitated the taking of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families have been produced by a government that represents the interests of these students. They are the policy makers in a way, they have taken responsibility for what has happened. There is an indebtedness to Country and its people, there is an indebtedness to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, there is also an indebtedness to past policies and practices of government. They 'share the norms' (Butler, 2010, p. 99) that at once both provide the frames in which their own lives are enriched, while also rendering traumatic the lives of others. Our lives are always inter-dependent.

In a review of the scholarship on how education might intervene in the teaching about traumatic knowledge, Zembylas (2014, p. 391) argues that Britzman's concern for an education based on 'encountering the self through the otherness of knowledge' (2014, p. 409) leaves her conceptual project 'wrapped up in the dilemmas of representation'. Meanwhile others such as Farley's concept of 'radical hope' do not necessarily offer an action-oriented solution.

Clough (2000) warns that the proliferation of personal narratives about trouble and suffering do not offer a theory and politics of social change. The limited sense of how either teacher or student might deal with traumatic knowledge brings Zembylas (2014, p. 395) to focus on the 'affective force' of difficult knowledge to develop a pedagogy that could accommodate difficult knowledge. Zembylas highlights that what remains unanswered in these various examinations of difficult knowledge is how we can learn from it.

### **How we can learn from the experiences of the Stolen Generations**

Empathy is one of the 'bread and butter' approaches to teaching about the experiences of others in education. It has long been accepted as an effective strategy for giving children insight into the experiences of others. However, Todd complicates the accepted paradigms around the teaching of empathy in schools in North America. She (2003, p. 44) draws on the example of school children who are expected to participate in events such as the '40-hour famine', where students limit their intake of food. Todd notes that through experiencing and reflecting on their own hunger, children are expected to gain insight into what starving children must be feeling. But Todd (2003) observes that the school students have probably never met or spoken with any of the starving children, let alone experience such degrees of starvation. This is one of many attempts in schools to generate a particular affect, where students are asked to stand in the shoes of another, and in this case to share 'another's pain' (Todd, 2003, 45) or to make students susceptible to needs of others (Levinas, 1998). Learning through

empathy with starving children, or through the experience of cultural difference (for example, 'Cultural Harmony Day') or even through stories from the Stolen Generations is perhaps nothing more than the 'imaginative reconstruction of another's experience' (Meyers, 1994, p. 33), and an activity of the ego that ultimately serves the interests of the self. As an approach to learning and teaching in education, empathy is indeed a dangerous activity (Todd, 2003, 62).

Roger Simon (2011b, p. 434) takes a close look at curating difficult knowledge through exhibitions of historical trauma to conclude that 'difficulty happens when one's conceptual frameworks, emotional attachments, and conscious and unconscious desires delimit one's ability to settle the meaning of past events.' Butler (2004, p. 141) observes that 'when we consider the ordinary ways that we think about humanization and dehumanization, we find the assumption that those who gain representation, especially self-representation, have a better chance of being humanized and those who have no chance to represent themselves run a greater risk of being treated as less than human, regarded as less than human, or indeed not regarded at all'

This paper has endeavoured to explore the various ways in which the teaching and learning about traumatic knowledge has been approached in education. Some progress has been achieved through the theoretical work of Britzman and Zembylas, who highlight above that what remains unanswered in these various examinations of difficult knowledge is how we can learn from it. Much work remains to be done in education in terms of how trauma informed education can engage students in studies of difficult histories, including that of the Stolen Generations. Teachers also need to be able to recognise the impacts of traumatisation in the classroom and to understand how they might respond. The final section draws on the work of a psychologist working with a major sexual assault and domestic violence service in Australia to present some principles around trauma informed teaching.

### **Trauma informed teaching**

A model for recognising and accommodating the presence of traumatisation whilst providing health related services already exists. Whilst teaching is a different endeavour to providing health services, much of the aims of trauma informed work apply readily to an educational environment. The broad aims of trauma informed work are to recognise and understand the impacts of traumatisation, and enable robust engagement in the task at hand because the impacts of traumatisation are being minimised at the time of engagement (Klinik Community Health Centre, 2013; Kezelman & Stavropoulos, 2012).

Every social system has the capacity to aid recovery from traumatisation or to hinder recovery and exacerbate the symptoms (Klinik Community Health Centre, 2013). In addition, social situations in which people have differential power (as is the case in a teacher-student interaction) can inadvertently replicate the dynamics of abuse and many traumatic events (Morgan, Pendergast, Brown & Heck,

2015). Whilst the importance of teaching about traumatic content has been clearly outlined (Simon & Eppert, 1997), it is important to consider how we teach about these events so as to minimise student suffering and optimise learning.

Trauma informed work highlights the context of learning and understands the power of supportive relationships as a vehicle for effectively creating knowledge, incorporates protective factors into the generalised context of learning about trauma, reduces student isolation, opposes the dynamics of abuse, minimises exacerbation of impacts, creates an experience of positive interpersonal relating, assists the development of effective intrapersonal functioning, assists availability of cognitive capacities to the learning and therefore maximises the learning capacity of students (Morgan et al., 2015). This can be achieved by attending to the following principles, and in presenting these we draw on a range of studies including Clinic Community Health Centre (2013), Carello & Butler (2013), Kezelman & Stavropoulos (2012), Black (2006) and Cunningham (2004).

### **Trauma informed teaching principles**

- i. Understand the widespread prevalence of trauma and recognise that many students will be impacted by trauma
- ii. Understand the impacts of trauma so that you can recognise them in yourself and your students
- iii. Inform students in advance of traumatic content to be taught and the materials to be used in that teaching
- iv. Increase students' choices about how they engage with traumatic content including giving permission to students to avoid trauma content that is not mandatory
- v. Give away the ending or the conclusion so that students may be psychologically prepared for the lesson
- vi. Assist students to move from the overwhelm of witnessing to focus on what to do with this information in more practical terms
- vii. Incorporate activities that regulate the nervous system after exposure to traumatic content. Simple exercises such as slowly counting breaths in and out, making exhalations slightly longer than inhalations or debriefing one's reactions to the trauma content with others will assist students to regulate their systems and maximise cognitive processing of the information that has been provided
- viii. Provide information to students about counselling options
- ix. Strive to be culturally appropriate and informed
- x. Understand the power of relationship as a vehicle to assist students to stabilise and regulate.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has focused on how to learn safely in the context of learning and teaching about trauma in education. It has presented the experiences of Ivan Clarke, who was taken as a child from parents and placed in foster care. It has also presented the experiences of a teacher working in Teacher Education at Macquarie University to explore ways in which his teaching about trauma can be most effectively pursued in an era when issues of vulnerability are severely mediated by governments and press. Neil Harrison has been exploring ways in which trauma informed pedagogy can be included in the curriculum when we know that such work demands more than 'knowing your students'. Simon highlights the dangers of empathy: 'How do we guard against reducing another's suffering to imaginative or quite real versions of our own; against merging other people's experiences into our own? The paper has also presented a psychologist who has attempted to answer the question of just what demands are created when teaching about traumatic experiences of others.

With the help of Butler, we have suggested that it is possible to 'hear' the stories of others when we experience some sense of 'mutual vulnerability', that is, when we are already implicated in the story being told or read. These are the people who can see themselves being seen. As a lecturer sitting in a theatre with students listening to Ivan's story, I feel myself and my emotions being seen by students. On the other hand, egos that defend a stoic and disengaged identity must be put aside in order to engage with something new and unthought, and potentially overwhelming and unbearable.

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