

Relationships of Power: An analysis of School Practicum Discourse

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The practicum has long been recognised by teacher educators, student teachers and practising teachers in schools as a significant aspect of pre-service teacher education. The role of the classroom teacher is central in addressing the practice-theory dichotomy (Eltis 1991), and on many occasions, the success of the practicum can be attributed to the relationship forged between student and supervising teacher. The school practicum is a site of discourse where identities and subject positions are created, relationships of power are negotiated, established, maintained and broken down. Little research in an Australian context has examined the experiences of student teachers who are overseas born and educated non-native speakers of English, although well known scholars such as Eltis (1991) Tomlinson (1995) Field (1994) and Koop (1993) have researched and documented the importance and changing role of supervising teachers. This paper which is based on a case study seeks to build on that existing work by examining the relationships of two Chinese born student teachers and their supervising teachers in two separate Melbourne secondary schools. By using critical discourse analysis I have compared the ways in which the student teachers are positioned by their supervising teachers and the discourses which shape their experiences and help build their successes and failures.

The two student teachers under focus, Ling and James (pseudonyms) share many similarities. They are both Chinese born, in their thirties, have similar levels of education and similar levels of English language competence. They share similar views about education in Australia, believing it to be of a poorer standard than in China and not sufficiently valued by Australian students. They believe teachers are as important as parents in shaping the lives of young people and should be given unquestioned respect. Both Ling and James have been in Australia for about four years. They have degrees from Chinese universities and are training to be Chinese language teachers and English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers. Ling was a primary school teacher in China and currently teaches Victorian Certificate of Education level (VCE) Chinese at a Saturday morning language school. James has some experience teaching adults in a workplace training environment in China and was also a journalist.

For his first practicum, James attended a Melbourne eastern suburbs middle class school and taught VCE level ESL while Ling was sent to an inner northern suburbs working class school to teach year nine ESL. Their classes comprised of students from a variety of ethnic backgrounds including Vietnamese, Chinese, Turkish and Arabic. Both student teachers were supervised by experienced and well qualified ESL teachers who have Anglo-Australian backgrounds.

During their practicum they shared some common problems based on difficulties encountered as a result of unfamiliarity with the Australian education system. These included uncertainty about the way to address students and other teachers and uncertainty over what

constitutes acceptable classroom behaviour in Australia. However, their levels of success during practicum were vastly different. James enjoyed his experience and felt comfortable in the school and in his new role as teacher. He reported having few difficulties in his relationship with the students or his supervising teacher and felt that he made a real contribution to the students' learning while making huge gains in his own teacher knowledge. Ling described her experiences as "terrible", saying she "had a very bad time", that the staff were unfriendly, that she had only been permitted to take three classes, had become stressed and ill and unable to attend for some of the practicum.

Although there might be a number of factors which contributed in some way to the student teachers' varying experiences on practicum, I believe the differences can mainly be attributed to the ways in which their supervising teachers allowed them access to teacher knowledge and the ways they were encouraged or discouraged in developing their identities as teachers. Firstly, I'd like to look at the relationship of Ling and Ms. T and examine the sets of binary opposites which are evident in the discourses which shape and construct their identities..

The discourses peculiar to Ling's relationship with her supervising teacher, Ms. T., construct Ling as powerless, Ms. T. as powerful, Ling as incompetent, Ms. T. as competent, Ling as submissive, Ms. T. as assertive, Ling as weak, Ms. T. as strong, Ling as oppressed and Ms. T. as liberated. They serve to position Ling outside the teacher role rather than empowering her to take her place within it, making it almost impossible for her to even begin to make the transition from student to teacher.

Prior to Ling's arrival in the school, Ms. T. says to the students, I gave them a bit of a drilling before (she arrived). I said it'll be difficult for her and it might be frustrating for you, but she's not here for a long time so I'm just asking you to give her a go and we'll pick up where she left off.

Even before Ling begins teaching, her presence within the class is predicted as problematic - "difficult" and "frustrating". Ms. T. emphasises the shortness of the practicum and appeals to the students for tolerance and patience. The shift in the use of the pronoun "I" to "we" constructs a division, a sense of solidarity between students and teacher against an outsider, - the alien other.

This construction of Ling as other by Ms. T. can be seen to be linked with her ethnicity. Ms. T. says of their initial meeting, "When I saw her, I thought oh no, back to square one, she's going to have problems." What is it about Ling's appearance which prompts this reaction in Ms. T.? What is it about the way she looks which flags predictions about her potential performance on practicum? Is it her Asian appearance and consequently "otherness" which has immediately given rise to Ms. T.'s prediction of the ensuing problems? The notion of "otherness" in the case of Ms. T. and Ling can be linked to Said's Orientalism, an imperialist discourse "that is racist in that it explicitly or implicitly claims white supremacy over non-European peoples and cultures" (Nozaki and Inokuchi 1996:73). It is the division between East and West, the notion of "them", the non-Western, outsider and incorporated weaker partner to the West.

The binary opposites of competence/incompetence, strength/weakness, assertiveness/submissiveness, oppression/liberation, power/powerlessness which dominate much of Ms. T.'s description and comparison of Ling with herself, reflect the orientalist assumptions which have played an important part in Australia's history and

formation of national identity. According to Nozaki and Inokuchi these assumptions still persist in Australia today in a form of orientalism which they refer to as Asianism (1996:73).

Ling's ethnicity clearly impinges on Ms.T.'s judgement of her as a teacher. Ms.T. suggests that Chinese teachers are passive and ineffective and that this is reflected in their poor and inferior teaching methodology. "In China they just stand up at the front and teach and you pick it up or you don't, too bad". This negative classification of the way "they" do it in China allows Ms.T.'s "us" category to take on all the desirable characteristics "they" in China do not possess. She concedes that Europeans would have some problems, but they'd be very different because the class dynamics would operate a lot different to your village school in Asia.

The use of the word "village" to exclusively describe an Asian community implies backwardness, a lack of sophistication and inferiority. Very clearly here we see attitudes reflecting characteristics of Orientalism, the East and West division and the assumption that the European way of doing things is superior to that of

the East.

Ms. T. comments that the Asian born teachers at her school rarely take on positions of responsibility. It is possible that the existence of racist discourse at the school level positions these teachers in ways which disempower them and discourage them from moving into positions of increased responsibility.

Ling's standard of English is often criticised as a reason for her ineffectiveness and lack of success during the practicum. In recounting her response to the students' view of Ling as teacher Ms. T. says, They started complaining to me about her English and I'd say, well look, it's very difficult for her like it was for you when you came out.

This, in effect, displaces responsibility for the problems and perspective from the teacher to the students. Ms. T.'s use of pronouns reflects two distinct sets of positionings. She aligns herself (me) with the students (they) against Ling, the alien other, appearing as the students' confidante. She attributes student status to Ling by directly comparing her to the students (her/you). Here, Ling's language is constructed as problematic and she is represented as not having progressed any further than the ESL students in her charge. The English wasn't there for her to socialise with the kids, I mean I've had a joke with them and you have this, you know, backwards and forwards banter and all that but she doesn't have the English for that.

Once more, there is a comparison between Ling and Ms. T. Here, English is described in terms of a personal attribute, something which one "has", rather than something in which one actively engages - an inherent characteristic.

As supervising teacher, Ms. T. is responsible for the assessment of student teacher performance during teaching practice. Her position is authorised and sanctioned by both the school and university. Her judgments are powerful and far reaching. However, she often uses what she perceives to be her own teacher effectiveness as a benchmark by which to unfairly judge Ling's performance as an inexperienced teacher. In this way the continuation of Ms. T.'s position as gatekeeper of teacher knowledge and power and domination over Ling is ensured.

If Ms.T. were to forgive Ling for her shortcomings as an inexperienced teacher, it would mean a re-positioning of both players, an adjustment involving the balance of power. As the gatekeeper of teacher knowledge she seems reluctant to compromise her position.

The year nines would have been a good level to get into - I like their topics and all that but she didn't have a clue. She'd just give them something and assumed they'd know it. I'd have to point out language, you know they won't know what this means, what that means.

She resorts to cliché to defend her actions.

I thought no, she just has to sink or swim here. You've got to be cruel to be kind sometimes. Had we molly coddled her, she probably would not have been aware of her problems.

In allowing Ling to "drown", which was the inevitable result, Ms. T. is not being "kind" but boosts herself as strong and powerful and not prepared to tolerate weakness.

Ms. T.'s description of herself as physically strong and capable contrasts with the implied image of a diminutive powerless oriental woman who is over-awed by Ms. T.'s display of physical strength. She came along on an excursion, a bushwalk and she was amazed at the backpack I had to carry. I can carry twenty kilos, it kills me but I can do it. She wanted to help me, I thought no, leave me alone I can do it on my own.

Her vehement rejection of Ling's offer of assistance to carry a backpack on an excursion not only confirms her independence, but possibly indicates contempt for Ling.

The image of Ling as passive reflects orientalist assumptions about the Asian woman and are reflected in many of the spatial metaphors used by Ms. T. to describe Ling. She is most often described in terms which reflect smallness, inadequacy, dependency, a fear of occupying space. She is referred to as having "her own little territory", "running behind" Ms. T., "happy to back off", "holding back", being taken "under the wing of another teacher", having "jokes wash over her", being in a "submissive position" and having "body language like a pole". She is also criticised for being polite.

She was, you know, too polite, whereas I would have got up there and said will you shut up and give others a break.

Politeness is a stereotype Asian characteristic. Being too polite is constructed as a fault by Ms. T., a weakness, which she regards as no match for her own assertiveness and strength.

On several occasions Ling's attempts to relate to the students are described by Ms. T. as motherly and in mother mode. It's hard to ignore the blatantly gendered nature of these descriptions and the intersections of racialising practices and gender. According to scholars such as Spivak (1988), Bhabha (1990) and McClintock (1995) discourses of gender and race do not exist in isolation from each other and are often intertwined and inter-dependant. Not only is Ling Chinese, she's also female - the two combine to make what Mohanty (1993) refers to in her exploration of the tensions between white feminism and colonised "other" as "the oppressed third-world woman". The third-world woman, in addition to suffering oppression generated through gender difference also suffers oppression as a result of

"third- world" difference. Third-world women are as a group automatically defined, among other things as family oriented and domestic and often struggle to "rise above the debilitating generality of their object status" (1993:213). Ms. T. representative of the

comparatively liberated Western woman, has, by implication broken free of the traditionally debilitating yoke of motherhood and domesticity and embraced the role of professional teacher. Ling, representative of oppressed Asian women, has not. In referring to what she perceives as Ling's failed practicum, she says "I guess the sense of failure is going to be a lot more dramatic as a Chinese woman". Is the "loss of face" often associated with Asians likely to be worse for a woman who has attempted to move from oppressed domestic situation to a career?

I'd now like to look at James' relationship with his supervising teacher, Ms. C. James, like Ling, is also Chinese but is male and not subject to fitting the image of passivity and reservedness which belongs to Ling because of her gender. He is described by terms such as "charming", "tactful", as having "integrity", "confidence" and "flexibility". He had "a good presence", unlike Ling who had "no presence" and he is seen to take on the role of "adult and teacher" in the classroom. Ms. C. positions James as a strong and capable individual and compares herself to him when she was a student teacher. He was willing to reflect a lot on his teaching and he wasn't at all put on the defensive by any criticism you know I really admired that. I mean when I was a student teacher I'd get really upset and I thought gee, it's really good he's like that. Here we have almost a reversal of the power operating in Ms. T. and Ling's relationship.

Ms. C. establishes her role as mentor and empowers James to take on the role of teacher and win the respect of the students by allowing his non-English speaking background to work for him rather than against him.

I tried to get him to emphasise his background a lot to the kids, and that he'd been a journalist and that he really knew how to write. I think they were interested in the fact that he came out here and didn't speak English very well and now here he was being a teacher, you know. I think that helped a bit.

Ms. C. also expressed some concern over James' English language competence and his ability to effectively model English. However, she approached the issue very differently to Ms. T.

I hadn't thought of him as having an accent so I didn't think of it until he was in front of the class and then it suddenly hit me. Gosh he has got an accent and his English isn't as good as I thought. He doesn't write terribly grammatically either and I think that's a concern. A couple of times he did a couple of things on the board that

were a bit strange but I didn't say anything.

The fact that Ms. C. did not notice James' accent until he was in front of the class and she was closely observing him in his role as teacher, indicates that his accent played no part in her initial judgement of him and had no effect on their communication.

Because of the importance of teachers as effective models of language in ESL education, student teachers' errors might be a legitimate concern. However, by not saying anything to James in front of the students, Ms. C. allowed him to maintain his confidence, integrity and authority in the eyes of the students.

In summing up, it is unlikely that the racist discourse evident in Ms. T. and Ling's situation is confined to one site, an isolated example of discourse shaping the identity of one student teacher in one school. According to Fairclough.

The discursive constitution of society does not emanate from a free

play of ideas in people's heads but from a social practice which is firmly rooted in and oriented to real, material social structures (Fairclough 1992:66).

Racism is not only manifested in the attitudes and actions of irrational individuals who are somehow separate from mainstream society and subscribe to bizarre and generally unaccepted views. Racist discourses can become naturalised, that is, legitimised, rationalised and accepted as the commonsense way of seeing the world. Opinions become fact and definitions of individuals are taken for granted as truth. The power of racist discourse lies in its invisibility. Rizvi refers to a covert form of racism which "represents a practical ideology rooted in everyday cultural practices" (1993:131). The ideology of Poplar Racism "works through certain cultural practices of representation, which make it possible to sustain particular racist constructions of social difference" (1993:131).

Ms. T. is unlikely to see her attitudes towards Ling and other Chinese teachers as racist, but rather as knowledge shared and taken for granted by teachers in general. Ms. T., is, after all, an ESL teacher and the characteristics of those in her type of work must surely be tolerance and acceptance of cultural difference. She expresses what appears to be sincere personal concern and sympathy for the stress Ling obviously experienced on her teaching practice. However, the stress is seen to be a result of the type of person Ling is, rather than having any connection with her relationship with Ms. T. During the interviews Ms. T. expresses concern on many occasions for the welfare of her ESL students as well as respect for their cultures and the difficulties of re-settlement. However, this acceptance and tolerance is at odds with the ways she positions Ling. If Ling were an ESL student Ms. T. would

be less likely to feel the need to assert her power in the relationship - it would be implicit in their roles as teacher and student. She is potentially an equal in the teaching profession and a competitor for the upward mobility, power and status often associated with the professions. She is attempting to enter an area which traditionally has been dominated by Anglo-Australians, some of whom have worked hard to gain entry to the middle classes from working class backgrounds. Many are likely to be protective of their positions in the hierarchy. People like Ling, according to Beverley Gordon, will ...compete with our children and ostensibly with us for a share of the power and reallocation of resources. And while most of us do have good intentions, when our social status is threatened, we tend to become even more conservative in order to protect our material gains (in Sleeter 1993:158).

In her studies of predominantly white teachers in a multicultural and multi-racial society, Sleeter (1993) suggests that racism is not likely to be reversed because those in control of the education system, that is, white middle class teachers will always be faced with the dilemma of working towards a reversal of racism or protecting their own interests. It is possible to draw parallels between this American experience and an Australian context. Although the majority of Australian teachers are monocultural and monolingual (Dooley and Singh 1996), university statistics indicate that a small but increasing number of Asian born people satisfying the language proficiency requirements and potential for employment are enrolling in teacher education courses in response to recent government policies for the teaching of languages other than English, especially Asian languages (DSE and Ministerial Advisory Committee on LOTE 1993, and Rudd Report 1994). They are entering our schools firstly as student teachers, than as teachers. This trend is expected to continue. Ms. C. expresses the view that many teachers and parents at her school prefer teachers to

be native speakers and believe that overseas born and educated teachers are less effective than their Australian counterparts. If this is reflective of the general attitudes within schools, there are enormous implications for the survival of teachers of ethnically diverse background currently working in our schools and those intending to enter the teaching profession.

Until those from ethnically diverse backgrounds gain access to our system as teachers and are positive and powerful role models who are allowed to make significant contributions to the shape of education, it is unlikely that racism will be reversed. Relying on the inclusion of units on multicultural education in teacher pre-service and in-service courses for predominantly Anglo-Australian students as the answer to the elimination of racism in education is unlikely to be successful if it is "common knowledge" that overseas born and educated student teachers and teachers have greater difficulties than their Australian

born and or educated counterparts and are already deemed ineffective and less worthy. Studies by Haberman and Post (1992) indicate that initial attitudes, biases and perceptions of ethnically different students were reinforced rather than reconstructed as a result of multicultural education. Claims that increased intercultural contact between students and others will reduce stereotyping and prejudice have also been criticised as inaccurate and in some cases have produced greater prejudice.

Most beginning teachers find their first practicum challenging and demanding. For overseas born and educated student teachers, the difficulties associated with making the transition from student teacher to teacher are compounded by unfamiliarity with the Australian education system. Most of them have never been in an Australian school and need time and assistance to adjust to the different cultural expectations of teachers, learners and schools. It is imperative that universities address the needs of this particular group of students by offering course units about the culture of schooling in Australia, support and closer supervision by university staff, extended practicum and in-servicing of supervising teachers about the needs of overseas born and educated student teachers but the existence of racist discourse is more difficult to tackle. It is difficult to know how deeply racist attitudes are entrenched within our schools? How far do racist attitudes extend beyond individual teachers like Ms. T.? They may well extend to entire school communities - other teachers, students, parents and administrators. Meticulous preparation of our student teachers is not likely to matter in the eyes of those who judge them according to their cultural background.

What is certain however, is that we cannot begin to seriously raise the status of Asian languages other than English, teach the value of cultural diversity and the acceptance of cultural difference, redefine the notion of "us" and "them" in our relations with Asia and reverse racism if we position our Asian born teachers as powerless and ineffective within our schools.

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