

Who's Asking the Questions? an attempt to research race, ethnicity and teachers

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It all seemed very straightforward. We knew the rules of the game. In August 1996 we applied for a small Australian Research Council grant. The aim of our project was to understand the ways in which overseas-born-and-educated non-native English-speaking teachers are positioned by their colleagues, and the factors which contribute to their success or failure as teachers within the Victorian education system.

Our idea for the project emerged from an earlier mentored seeding grant where Santoro (1997) examined the experiences of two Chinese-born-and-educated student teachers on their three-week practicum in Melbourne secondary schools. Her investigation of the way student teacher identities were constructed by their supervising teachers linked student teacher performance with ethnicity, status as non-native speakers of English, and gender. What we saw and understood as the racist attitudes of one supervising teacher, in particular, raised serious concerns for us about how far racist discourses might extend beyond this particular student teacher/supervisor relationship and the wider implications for teacher education.

Using this study as a pilot we developed the small ARC application. In institutional terms, we were performing to task. Mentored seeding grants have as a condition of funding the promise that they will be developed into small ARC grant applications. Having met this demand, we endured the usual period of waiting and in November 1996 received notice that our ARC application had been successful. The \$20,000 we had requested, however was reduced to \$12,000. We were later told this was because the demands for funding were high, and the pool of money accrued from Large ARC grants, too small to meet that demand. The university committee, in its wisdom, elected to distribute less money to more people. Disappointed, but thankful our \$20,000 had not been reduced to \$5,000 like some of our colleagues, we began to imagine how to reduce the scope of our study to meet the funds we now had available to us.

The next step was to develop an ethics application for both University and Department of Education approval, as all funding would be withheld until University ethical clearance had been completed. Our first application (to the University) was lodged in February 1997 and while we awaited approval, we began to develop the questionnaire that constituted the first part of our study. As the period of funding was one year only, we felt under great time pressure to get started as quickly as possible in order to achieve our multiple goals.

We received ethics clearance in April, however, this was conditional on amending the Plain Language Statement and Consent Form for Principals. It appeared to the University Ethics Committee that our Principals' Questionnaire was slightly problematic. Our research design, now constrained because of the reduction in funding, was revised to make the questionnaire serve a purpose which, in the original design, would have been obtained through interview. On paper now, it appeared as if we were asking Principals to assess the competence of our target group of teachers. Consequently we spent more days amending these statements to satisfy the Committee's concerns, resubmitted our amendments, and were granted final clearance in May. Having received both financial support and ethical clearance, we now assumed that we were finally able to work with our planned research design. But this was our mistake.

At the time of writing this paper (November 1997), we have still not

yet commenced our project. The necessary approval from the Department of Education has still not been received and our access to government secondary schools has been denied. The protracted period of correspondence between ourselves and the Department of Education, their continued demands for more and different information and the final rejection of our proposal, has been followed by an appeal and on-going in-person negotiations to gain access via the intervention of our Dean and Head of School. Our competency as researchers has in the meantime been called into question by a recent letter from the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research), reminding us that expenditure must occur in the year of the grant and that our failure to do so raises 'difficult questions' which 'relate to adequate planning of the project and even whether the grant was necessary or appropriate.'

In this paper we open our own research practice to scrutiny, as we attempt to evaluate the practical and theoretical tools of our research trade. The paper will document and elaborate our experience of attempting, ethically, to research politically 'sensitive' issues in the current political and social climate. We present it as a cautionary tale for other researchers, and as an indication of the ways in which we think that research ground rules may be shifting in an increasingly conservative climate. This leaves us asking ourselves and our colleagues in the wider research community: Who's Asking the Questions?

Why were we asking the questions?

There are a number of reasons why we see our project on the issue of racism in Australian society as particularly significant for educational research at the present time. Recent Victorian government policies on teaching Languages Other Than English (LOTE) have created a demand for teachers who can speak and teach Asian languages in particular. However, the effects of this demand are not simple, and the LOTE policies have to be seen, post-Hanson, as susceptible of criticism from within the mainstream teaching profession in Victoria. Criticism of the employment of LOTE teachers and the funding of LOTE programs has begun to be voiced in some school staffrooms, especially given loss of employment in the mainstream school sector as a result of concurrent government policy moves towards school closures. Most LOTE teachers, particularly teachers of Asian languages are overseas born and educated non-native speakers of English. When Rong and Preissle (1997: 282) note that "[i]mmigrant minority teachers are more likely to be convenient scapegoats in political and economic crisis when nativist feelings are high", they point to one of the problematic factors that does characterise the experience of overseas- born-and-educated non-native speakers of English in many schools in these 'hard times'. This is that the 'naturally acquired' language skills of native speakers of some Asian languages are more desirable in members of the teaching profession than the skills and knowledge of many English-only speaking teachers whose teaching 'range' is therefore much more limited.

However Asian-language speaking teachers form only part of the group upon which our study focuses. While overseas-born-and educated non-native English speaking teachers are increasingly entering the Victorian teaching service, anecdotal reports suggest that there are also significant numbers resigning from the teaching profession each year. In the interests of our own work as teacher educators, we want to find out why. We are therefore interested researchers, as all of us are increasingly working with overseas students, and supervising them in teaching practice situations.

Mills and Buckley (1992) point to a number of 'sensitive areas' for educators who need to accommodate cultural diversity. These include areas such as culturally-defined perceptions of, for instance: dress, beauty, respect for authority, maturity, communicating acceptance and rejection, and showing authority. These are areas which our study will investigate in relation to the experience of overseas-born-and-educated non-native speakers of English in the professional settings of schools, rather than in the pre-service training institutions in which Mills and Buckley's research was carried out.

We have also taken account of the need to investigate the differences between the experiences of overseas-born-and-educated non-native speakers of English in different cultural-geographical settings.

Zimpher and Ashburn (1992), highlight the extent to which many people who chose to enter the teaching profession and thus the colleagues of overseas-born-and-educated non-native speakers of English are

often 'culturally insular", and claim that this "may be a function of limited access to diversity and little tolerance toward difference' (p.44). As well as addressing the social culture of schools as workplaces, though, we consider that our project may be significant in terms of an associated need to 'look as well to the nature of the teacher preparation program as a way to broaden the learning and awareness of our current students, particularly since they do not reflect the diverse teacher population that we ultimately seek to establish' (Zimpher and Ashburn, 1992:44).

Although Zimpher and Ashburn (1992) are speaking from a North American context, where it is to be expected that concerns such as these have been raised for several decades now, it is still surprising that here in Australia there is so little information available even about the numbers and demographic characteristics of overseas-born-and-educated non-native English speaking teachers. Their presence therefore remains largely 'invisible' as a proportion of the teaching population. This lack of attention may be read as simply implying that the individuals comprising this group of teachers make a successful transition to the Australian education system, and that 'there is no problem here'. However, Santoro's (1997) findings suggest otherwise. They suggest that teachers who are overseas-born-and-educated non-native speakers of English may be positioned within racist discourses in our schools and may well be regarded by colleagues as ineffective and incompetent because of this. As the numbers of overseas-born-and-educated non-native speakers of English who are graduating from Victorian

universities are increasing to meet the Victorian education system's increasing demand for LOTE teachers, the need to investigate and make visible the experiences of this particular group of teachers is made all the more urgent.

Our focus on a minority group of teachers, many of whom are also members of racial groups which have become a political target for disempowered and disenfranchised mainstream minority groups, it seems to us, also raises a number of questions about the rules of the research game in a post-Hanson Australia. As one commentator writes:

When we know that researchers have played a key historical role in legitimating biological racism through the way they constructed scientific concepts, this awareness should present a challenge to us to critically examine our own present concepts too, so that we know who stands to benefit from our theoretical work in constructing tools for our own trade and from our empirical work in using these tools.

(Skutnabb-Kangas, 1990, p.98)

The Howard government is embarrassed at home and overseas by growing international condemnation of the apparent violation of Human Rights argued by supporters of the Aboriginal land rights issue post Mabo. Increasingly, it has had to endure even more embarrassing condemnation regarding the poor health, housing and infant mortality rates among Aboriginal Australians. It is therefore concerned to downplay any public accounting of the sensitivity and origins of these issues.

Howard's inability to provide the public apology so clearly necessary in the wake of the Stolen Generation inquiry and his blind eye towards the content of Hanson's explicitly racist agenda in this country are all indicators of the extent to which the New Times in which we are living are very much a sorry product of our history. As, historically, both research and researchers in the natural and social sciences have been deeply implicated in constructing and authorising racism in its many forms and realisations, we must be particularly concerned with the need to ensure this does not continue into the present time.

How were we framing our questions?

Our study specifically aims to collect data on the scope and nature of the population of overseas-born-and-educated non-native English speaking teachers in Victorian state secondary schools. It seeks also to examine the experiences of current overseas-born-and-educated non-native English speaking teachers in regional, rural and metropolitan schools, and make visible the extent to which social, cultural and personal factors contribute to any resignations from the teaching profession. Finally, our project aims to establish theoretical frameworks which contribute to understandings of racism and multicultural education.

Accordingly, we designed our study in two parts. The first is a demographic study of the population of teachers in Victorian state

secondary schools who are overseas-born-and-educated non-native speakers of English (we soon began using the acronym 'OSBENS' amongst ourselves). The second is a Case Study of twelve teachers from rural, regional and metropolitan areas, both male and female, both currently and formerly employed. In what follows, we first discuss the demographic study, and then the case study, in a chronological account of our progress. The two aspects of our research design are clearly related, in that the demographic study provides the ground against which particular case studies can be read. It would also assist in identifying potential participants for the Case Study, although this is not its main purpose. The information collected from the survey is designed to serve a mapping function, and to make visible the diversity, location and characteristics of this group of people.

We believed, as researchers, that our survey asked questions, the answers to which would be useful not only to inform educational policy but also to ourselves as teacher educators, and to one of us as a teacher educator of LOTE teachers. As this demographic information is not currently available, we assumed it would also be of interest and value to the Department of Education. This was our second mistake.

The process of developing the survey made visible to us the complexities of examining and reporting on the experiences of representative members of this group of overseas-born-and-educated non-native speakers of English without essentialising and positioning them as 'other'. Even the acronym we adopted to refer to them ðð

'OSBENS' ÐÐ a shortcut for a long and unwieldy term, creates a sense that overseas-born-and-educated non-native English speaking teachers are a definable and homogeneous group. In the initial design for the Case Study we intended to interview eight 'OSBENS' , and each of their principals and subject coordinators in order to get a detailed and triangulated perspective on the nature of the teachers' experiences. These twenty-four interviews were to be audiotaped and systematically transcribed, and returned to participants for verification and approval. While such methodology was principled, systematic and 'approved', we realised, after University ethics approval had been granted, that such a design not only made 'OSBENS' objects of a potentially racist discourse, but at the same time positioned principals, coordinators, and ourselves, as the (re)producers of this discourse.

We abandoned this design, but yet we did not want to lose the opportunity to obtain some qualitative sense of how 'OSBENS operated in the school context and, more particularly, were viewed by colleagues and school administrators. Accordingly, we reduced the number of interviews to twelve ÐÐ OSBENS only ÐÐ, removed the principals and coordinators as people we would interview, and attempted to build into the quantitative survey, a set of questions about teaching performance. Thinking we would work within familiar discourses of Victorian teacher effectiveness, we elected to use questions based on the Standards Council of the Teaching Profession (SCTP) Dimensions of Teaching (1995). A secondary principal who was asked to evaluate this

questionnaire found it "comprehensive". He "liked the format" and "[w]ould find it easy to fill out or delegate".

However, in practice, this is the aspect of the questionnaire that was found by many others to be problematic. It had been called into question by our own University ethics committee in their request for us to amend the Plain Language Statement and the letter to principals. We needed to clarify that our intention was not to ask principals to assess individual teachers. When the Department of Education also raised questions about our 'intentions to assess', it became clear that it was difficult for the Dimensions of Teaching guidelines to be seen as anything other than an evaluative instrument, despite our intentions.

What questions were we asking?

There were two parts to the demographic survey which we planned to send to the 400 state secondary schools in Victoria. The first part was designed to determine factual information about:

- ¥ the number of teachers currently working who are overseas-born-and-educated non-native English speakers,
- ¥ the countries of their birth, education and professional qualifications,
- ¥ the length of time they have worked as a teacher,
- ¥ the length of appointment in their current school,

¥ the subjects they teach,

¥ positions of responsibility they hold in the school, and

¥ the number employed by that school who had resigned in the last five years, and their stated reasons.

The second part was based on the STCP Dimensions of Teaching (1995), and called for comment about teachers' performance in the areas of: subject area content knowledge, programs and curriculum; knowledge of teaching and classroom management strategies; assessment and reporting of student learning; effective communication skills within the school community; and knowledge of professional policy and professional development opportunities.

In developing our questionnaire for principals, we sought consultation from a professional statistician. As we refined and developed questions to maximise the efficiency of the instrument, we became aware of the complex range of issues pertaining to this investigation of difference. In particular, we found it extremely difficult for us to speak about the 'objects' of our inquiry without, quite literally, objectifying them as a group with particular shared, and 'problem' characteristics. It seemed that the norm of the native English-speaking Australian born and educated teacher had become the standard against everything 'Other' was to be judged. For instance, we asked questions phrased in the following terms:

¥ What is the age range of these teachers?

- ¥ What are their teaching subjects?
- ¥ How long have they been in Australia?
- ¥ How long have they been teachers in your school?
- ¥ How were they recruited to your school?

Our questions appeared to be representing 'these teachers' as a homogeneous group who were identifiable as a group by their 'OSBENS' status. In this way, our questions were presupposing a difference that might not actually exist in the mind of the principal reading the questionnaire. As Troyna notes:

In the very act of treating ethnic minority groups as a unit of analysis in a research undertaking, the researcher may be culpable of unconscious racism. That is, he [sic] may actually create a difference associated with ethnicity that might not have occurred to those whom he is researching (1993, p.112).

We became aware that we were asking about the working situations and histories of teachers who are overseas-born-and-educated non-native speakers of English in a manner which tended to homogenise and essentialise them across race, ethnicity and gender. These are the very differences that we were trying to highlight and represent. In fact, the very nature of the shorthand acronym for our focus group, OSBENS, like its parallel terms, LOTE and NESB, clearly produces such homogenisation in and of itself. Such terms speak a description of this minority group's deficiency in terms of an assumed

English-speaking 'norm', as Skutnabb-Kangas notes:

Minority groups are seen as possessing integration-preventing characteristics which cause their problems. They are treated negatively, in terms of what they are not, do not have or do not represent (majority-language-speaking middle-class majority members). Terms like LEP- or NEP- children in the United States (Limited English Proficiency, or No English Proficiency) [...] reflect this (1990, p. 87).

'These [OSBENS] teachers', as we were producing them in our questions, were a group who were markedly different from other (non-OSBENS) teachers ÐÐ not in terms of 'race' explicitly, but none the less in a clearly racialised relation. As we set about the process of refining these questions, we were anxious to account for our concerns about the construction of racial difference in our own language as much as possible. The dominant discourse was producing us in ways that were anathema to our intent ÐÐ and in spite of our 'best intentions'. The politics around naming and speaking about other people, let alone other racial and cultural groups of people, is centred on the construction of self and self identity:

In differentiating between groups we start from ourselves, and compare with others, ie. differentiation presupposes images about the Others that are possible only when we also have images about Self (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1990, p.78, original emphasis).

As white, middle-class academic women, we were suddenly able to see ourselves as particularly compromised in this regard. Current scholarship on whiteness as a racialised position raises a number of issues about the taken-for-granted of the mainstream researcher.

Whiteness has, at least within the modern era and within Western societies, tended to be constructed as a norm, an unchanging and unproblematic location, a position from which all other identities come to be marked by their difference (Bonnett, 1996, p 146).

Our whiteness locates us all within the mainstream of the Australian teaching population. And our gender as researchers is, in the late 1990's, not a problem for us in any categorical sense. However we realise that we are also privileged in this regard. We do not face the devaluation of our work that occurs for some feminist minority group researchers who have focussed on other minorities. These researchers are often placed in a 'double bind', when, as members of a minority group, they focus their work outside of that group. Their work is devalued because it is not based on the features which "are defined as making them different" (Bhavnani and Phoenix, 1995, p.295). We must therefore be concerned that our work is not based within our own cultural identities. We are researching Others, the experiences of whom we do not directly share. We have drawn significantly from the work of Skutnabb-Kangas (1990) in this section, as she shares with us a concern that the research endeavour around race and racism may often,

unreflexively, serve as much to legitimate and perpetuate forms of racism as much as to resist and expunge them. Her solution is to challenge educational researchers to "live up" to ethical criteria recommended for practice by an international conference on Intercultural Education over ten years ago. These are difficult criteria for us to meet.

In a research economy where "survival of the fittest" makes it difficult for all members of dominant ethnic groups to "see the ideology in our own work", one precondition for the ethical conduct of anti-racist research is

for majority group researchers to work in the interests of migrant minorities and escape from ethnocentricity ... [They must] have first-hand experience, affectively and cognitively, of using the language and living in the culture of the minorities (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1990, p. 97).

Clarification of key concepts across languages is also necessary, she claims, as is "a need for research to be done for and by the minorities themselves" (p.98). As Rizvi (1990, p.7) shows, too, racist discourse "is continually changing, being challenged, interrupted and reconstructed" and "often appears in contradictory forms". The work of Henry and Brabham (1994) focussing on the racism inherent in much ostensibly 'well-intentioned' educational psychology and measurement around Aboriginal children, for instance, provides a clear and telling

illustration of this.

Questioning the questions

While our ethics application to the Department of Education was being processed, we were revising the questionnaire so that we could arrange distribution of the forms to principals as quickly as possible. As we noted earlier, although we were acutely aware of our obligations as ARC researchers to expend the allocated funds within the one year of funding, almost nine months later, the questionnaire has still not been distributed.

During these nine months we have engaged in an extended series of letter exchanges and conversations with representatives of the DOE, trying to negotiate access to schools. Without engaging in detailed analysis of that correspondence, we highlight in this section, both the nature of the delay and the nature of our different views of research legitimacy. Below we present a time line to capture the central points of negotiation.

4 April Initial request to undertake research in DOE Schools

13 May DOE requests more information about case study (selection of interviewees, nature of interview questions, why LOTE teachers should be interviewed, why it is not possible to generalise from a small interview population) and questionnaire (rationale for studying secondary not primary, state not non-state schools, why questions from

SCTP have been omitted or included, why principals should make judgments on teacher performance)

28 May Reply

8 July DOE requests more information about how interviewees will be selected, why LOTE teachers are being interviewed; raises concern about imposition on principal's time, ethics of asking principals to judge teacher performance using STCP guidelines; recommends study be reformulated to interview 6 teachers from the 22 Deakin partnership schools (rather from a statewide survey) about their professional development needs with respect to SCTP

2 August Reply (SCTP questions are dropped)

4 September Approval denied. 'Thank you for the additional information.

The Department of Education remains unconvinced of the value of this research to the Department. Primarily we are not convinced that the study, as proposed, will provide reliable data on which to base changes in pre or in service for teachers. Consequently I cannot give approval for this proposal.'

23 October Letter to Senior Manager DOE from Deakin University Senior Manager requesting reconsideration, with documentation of above correspondence

6 November Approval denied again

Phone message conveying review committee decision to deny access, with request to return phone call

13 November DOE Senior Manager meets with Deakin Senior Manager and Research team

17 November Research team faxes one page summary of project

18 November Research team and Deakin Senior Manager meet DOE Senior
Manager and three DOE staff to revamp survey questionnaire

25 November Revamped questionnaire submitted for DOE approval

The refusal of the DOE to engage with this project gives rise to a
number of possible readings as to why we have been unable to continue
with the project in the way that it was designed:

¥ a concern for workload for principals

¥ a fear of our uncovering racist practices in government schools

¥ unfamiliarity with a research project of this nature - the fact that

case study research cannot be generalised and/or belief that it will be
read by others as generalisable even though this is not the researchers'
intention

¥ mistrust of our professionalism as researchers, the implication being

that we have a vested interest in coming to a predetermined conclusion
in a liberal-conservative post-Hanson Australia.

Certainly, we now see our initial approach to the DOE as naive ÐÐ as
inextricably intertwined with issues of genre and political context.

Having received University Ethics approval in April, we were advised by
the DOE that our University Ethics application would also meet their
needs. Our initial letter on April 4 therefore, simply asked
permission from the DOE to conduct the study, and allowed the attached
university ethics application to speak for us. But it seems that was
also our mistake.

When we received the first DOE request for clarification in May we were surprised, as it seemed to us the information requested was clearly set out in the ethics application. When the second set of DOE requests and suggestions were made in July, we began to read these as delaying tactics, as it seemed from our perspective that every request for information, was information we had already documented in our previous letter. Further, we considered that the suggested DOE modifications were not only reductive, but inappropriate to the research as it had been funded by ARC.

In retrospect, it may well have been the case that we did not consider the reading practices being employed by the DOE ÐÐ and the way these were being shaped by the genre of ethics applications and the post-Hanson political context in which we were all now operating.

Reading practices are dependent on the political and cultural contexts in which texts are situated. The ethics application we submitted to the university was taken from our small ARC application. The rationale and methodology were copied exactly and as few modifications as possible were made to save time (common practice for busy academics negotiating increasing workloads). The application itself, however, foregrounded issues of race and ethnicity and there was little subtlety in our ways of expressing our aims. Our project title, 'Race, Ethnicity and Survival: A Study of Overseas-Born-and-Educated Teachers', our reference to the racist attitudes documented in Santoro's pilot

study and our stated goal of analysing race and ethnicity in the teaching profession may not have been the most appropriate way of selling our project in the context of a conservative state agenda and what was at that time, a developing national tide of Hansonism. We did not stop to consider that a study of race and ethnicity framed in August 1996 (when we first made our ARC application) would of necessity be read differently in April 1997 (when the DOE received our ethics application). Nor did we consider that the need to theorise practice for an ARC application in terms of issues of difference might be inappropriate in an application to the DOE.

It may also be the case that we got the genre wrong. University ethics applications are a genre peculiar to university settings, which may or may not be read accurately by government agencies interested in research for more pragmatic reasons. It takes time to learn how to write university ethics applications and those of us who have had to master the genre during the past five years, no longer see its demands as peculiar. Having learned the conventions of the genre, its strangeness becomes invisible to us and we assume it can be read transparently. The categories of that application, however, do not necessarily mean the same for government departments where the memo and briefing paper are more common genres - and the expectations about the utility of research may be different than the ARC funding body for whom our initial application was written.

It is clear that when we were asked to summarise our project for our

meeting with DOE representatives on 18 November, we constructed a very different genre: a single page summary of succinct prose, utilising bold headings, highlighting the two parts to the study (questionnaire and case study interview), the background, purposes and attaching a copy of the questionnaire. This genre, more in keeping with the institutional context of the DOE, then became the basis of discussion and re-negotiation of the proposed survey questionnaire. It must be said that this discussion was useful to us in revising the questionnaire to incorporate DOE terminology more familiar to principals. The addition of a few questions about the languages spoken by the overseas-born-and-educated teachers, which were seen to be useful to the DOE, was also useful to us, thus reinforcing our belief that the survey could be beneficial to us both.

At the time of writing this paper. however, we are still answering questions. Most recently it is the Director of Research of our University who has written to us, demanding to know why it is that we have not yet expended the allocated ARC funds when the period of funding has almost expired. The two meetings with the DOE in November have led us to revise and resubmit our questionnaire. Pending approval we hope to send it to schools for return in April 1998. And so one year after we believed we were commencing the project, we may finally be positioned to ask the questions. The access for case study interviews, however, has still not been granted.

The players and their positioning

As many of the DOE requests for more information centred on the case study and the kinds of questions we would be asking teachers in the interview, we decided to trial the questions we sent to the DOE (in our letter of 28 May) to see if they were productive. We used existing social and professional networks to arrange meetings with five teachers working outside the state school system, one of whom had left teaching, and four who remained working as teachers.

While we have not conducted any official interviews as yet, we are already able to refine our interview questions on the basis of these pilot interviews, and we are able, tentatively, to offer a provisional mapping of the positions available to these teachers in relation to the school system and the dominant mainstream culture. In the diagram below, we are attempting to delineate two overlapping discursive fields or domains of practice: the field of 'secondary school teaching in Victoria', and the field of 'cultural difference'. That these are discursive fields is important for our analysis: they are not fixed, or physically marked. The boundaries, norms and truths of each particular field remain provisionally held settlements at any particular point in time and space. The subjects of these discourses are constituted differently depending on their particular location within each field, and, relationally, as they overlap.

This diagram represents the school system as a discursive field of practice in which all these teachers are positioned as more or less

powerful subjects. A speaking subject of any discourse is one who has taken up a position of some power so that she or he may be heard as an agent for change and reform. These five teachers have all been prepared to talk to us about their experiences as teachers marked by ethnic difference in secondary schools. However, we suspect that changes in education policy, the increasing insecurity about continued employment, and the pressures against speaking out, prevent the four LOTE teachers who are currently employed from naming, or claiming their experiences as those of a culturally marked subject within the education system.

None of these four teachers explicitly names their workplace experiences as racist although three of the interviewees make claims of racist treatment out of a school context. Elizabeth, a teacher of Chinese background, believes that the taunts directed toward her by students are the result of their ignorance or a misguided attempt to be humorous.

At times you do have people ching-chonging you ... doing that eye gesture. The student they don't mean anything, right, but they just think it's very funny you know, in the classroom they can move their eyes and things like that and they think it's very funny. They don't realise that, that is not the right thing to do, right, but I don't think it is harmful. (Elizabeth, 1997)

Elizabeth also excuses her colleagues' reluctance to participate in a

multicultural day organised at the school as the result of a demanding workload. A staffroom suggestion that Pauline Hanson be called in to address the staff as guest speaker is also dismissed by Elizabeth as an attempt at a joke. Similarly, the reluctance by colleagues, other than those of "ethnic background", to sign a petition calling for government intervention in Pauline Hanson's racially motivated claims, is dismissed as apathy. She says:

They couldn't be bothered. They couldn't care less. Not that they are supporting Pauline Hanson. (Elizabeth, 1997)

Marie, a teacher of Lebanese background, talks about harassment from students that she has experienced in a teaching context, but does not name it as such. She explains the razor blades put on her seat by students, and the condoms hanging from the ceiling in one of her classroom, as nothing more than a 'first week prank'.

It was my first week. And I feel, why not, it's their privilege to try and daunt the teacher? Sometimes they're cute, but in that case it was rather rude. (Marie, 1997)

Such treatment by students would seem to go beyond the limits of acceptance for a first week prank and might be seen to reflect student attitudes towards Marie as a woman and, or, a woman of cultural difference.

All four teachers, including Mohammad, a teacher of Turkish descent, and Tung, a teacher of Chinese background, have developed strategies to minimise and deal with accusations of poor English language skills.

These strategies range from avoiding situations when they must speak English, to writing most of what they say on the board.

I try while speaking French not to speak much English. It has worked for me. I never say 'Take your shoes off', because the way I pronounce it would sound like something else, and they would laugh. I don't say 'Sit down' because if you happen to mispronounce it, we have laughter everywhere. (Marie, 1997)

Even though the teachers do not name their experiences as racism and prefer to explain them in other ways, three of them say they are happiest in schools with high student and staff cultural diversity.

However each of them claims to have numerous teacher friends who have experienced racism in their own schools.

I wouldn't say there's racism, right. Not at all.... but there are others you know, who can say there's racism (Irene 1997).

I've never felt that (racism) but your heart goes out to these young Chinese teachers and so on ... there's an adorable young Malay who comes from Singapore. She used to come in tears and then the vice principal would interfere. Too sweet to confront the arrogance of our

Australian students (Jeanne 1997).

I have one friend. He's a maths teacher, the kids laugh at his pronunciation (Mohammad 1997)

He told me that a student in his class told him "you're not a teacher, you're too stupid" to his face (Tung 1997).

Due to increased demand for teachers of languages other than English and the shortage of teachers who can fill these positions, particularly Asian languages, it might be expected that the LOTE teachers we interviewed would be in powerful and secure positions within their schools. However, this not appear to be the case. Elizabeth speaks of staff resentment at the expansion of the LOTE department at her school while other departments are downsizing. Apart from teaching their particular LOTES, and being seen to be important players in multicultural days, the teachers feel the schools they work in do not recognise the contribution they can make. Marie feels her ethnic difference is valued only as an "element of curiosity" and Mohammad feels insecure in what he can offer a school with a decreasing population of students who are likely or able to choose to study his particular LOTE. Elizabeth feels her most valuable role is to downplay cultural and ethnic difference.

That's how I see it right, like an ambassador, like cross culture you know. We're all the same in fact, right. We're all the same although

you know our habits are different. We eat different foods you know.

We have good people we have silly people, we have dumb one right, So, I just like people to know we're all the same, you know. I like to help out wherever I can. (Elizabeth, 1997)

There are parallels between the views expressed by the volunteer participants in our pilot interviews and the findings of Van Dijk (1992) in his work on discourse and the denial of racism. Van Dijk has found that those involved in perpetuating racism often adopt a number of strategies to downplay its significance or deny its existence.

These are strategies such as blaming the victim, reversing accusations of racism, and attempting positive self representation in negative discourse about minorities.

Our pilot interviews with the four teachers who are still practising reflect a tendency of these particular teachers to accept responsibility for the treatment they receive. They seem to believe their success in the school as workplace depends on them minimising the cultural difference between themselves and their students and colleagues. According to Tung, the overseas-born teachers who have the greatest difficulty in Australian schools are the ones who are not Australian enough. He claims that it is important for minority group teachers to 'be' more like the majority: to be able to take a joke, to forgo old values for new. While this, in fact, may be the key to survival for many overseas-born teachers, this assimilationist view flies in the face of all we value in multiculturalism. However, we

suspect that teachers' reluctance to name their experiences as racist stems from their position as players on the research map we have depicted above, in Figure 1. As well as being insiders to a discourse of cultural difference, they are also positioned as insiders to the discourse of secondary teaching. We have placed only one of the pilot interviewees, Noel, a former science teacher of Indian background, outside the mediating relations of multi discursive positioning. Noel is certainly an insider to politics of cultural difference but he is now an outsider to the education system, having resigned from teaching some years ago. Of all the interviewees, he is the only one prepared to name his experiences as racist, giving examples of his own experience of racial abuse from students, examples of overt discrimination from school administrators and colleagues. He is now outside the discursive field of teaching, and from the 'safety' of this position has named what he sees as several instances of racist practice within that field. Yet he is unwilling to allow us to interview his wife, a teacher still employed as a teacher, and still an 'insider' to the system.

These pilot interviews have raised numerous questions for our study as it waits to begin. Is it their status as insiders to the educational system which produces in the practising teachers a reluctance to name their experiences as racism? Are they fearful of accusing those they teach and work for, as racist? Or are we, as researchers, interpreting their experiences from a different perspective? Is our understanding of racism different from theirs? And who are we to play the shots?

Who are we to be asking these questions?

As majority group researchers attempting to find ways of working and teaching in the interests of migrant minorities, how can we hope to have the 'first-hand experience, affectively and cognitively, of using the language and living in the culture of the minorities' that Skutnabb-Kangas (1990, p. 97, cited above) claims is essential for an ethical research practice in this area. Should we take the advice of the DOE and give up on our project? Is it all too hard? Are we making too many mistakes? Our focus for this paper is on 'who's asking the questions': and thus on our own research practice. We have indicated how our own positioning as 'questioners' in relation to the object of our inquiry needs to be examined. Feminist theory generally reminds us of the obligation to scrutinise the position from which the subject of research is observed and the norms of any analysis.

It is only after reflection on these issues that we can place ourselves into the research relationship as interested participants in the questioning process. Our own histories and investments as teachers, teacher educators and researchers have clearly shaped and will continue to shape our interpretations of the data, just as much as they have shaped the methodology. Indeed, much of the motivation for the project itself has sprung from our own different positions within these same discourses, in their relation to a third discursive field, the discourse of research itself. As we have demonstrated above, our constitution as powerful speaking subjects of the university research (and ethics) system, is neither absolute nor transcendental. In

relation to the discursive field of secondary teaching in Victoria, our position as a research team is clearly not at all powerful ÐÐ we have not even been able to gain access to the field on our own terms. And it is clear from the small samples of correspondence we have provided above, that, on our terms, we will not .

In Figure 2 (below) we attempt to extend our research map to include ourselves, and the 'images about Self' that Skutnabb-Kangas (1990, p. 78) claims are originary to our images about Others. We have done this in relation to the three discursive fields we have currently considered. There will be others, of course, most notably the discourse of gender, which has already emerged clearly as an important aspect of all these relations, and which we anticipate will become clearer as we are able to begin the research. Indeed, our interests suggest that we will be looking for it!

Figure 2. Relations and Positioning in Discursive Fields

As we attempt to place ourselves on this research map, the complexity of the discourse of academic research its relation to other fields becomes immediately more apparent. Suddenly, in our 'ethical' efforts to make explicit our own images of self, more complications arise. Like all our research subjects in the pilot to date, for instance, Ninetta and Barbara are clearly not disinterested academic researchers. Both position themselves as also (simultaneously) subjects of discourses of cultural difference. Ninetta, as a first-generation

Australian, marked by her name as of non-Anglo-Celtic background, continues to experience the feeling of being culturally Other within her life history. Barbara, whose American accent marks her with what is mainly an exotic difference, feels herself less 'critically' culturally marked in Australia than does Ninetta. After all, these fields are themselves situated in mainstream discourses, media, and other fields of social practice that, in 1997, value markings of 'American' culture quite differently from those of other cultures.

Jo-Anne (as a fourth generation Anglo-Australian) has experienced none of this ethnic marking in Australia, yet she is also an interested researcher with her own investments in this field. She has lived as a young woman in other cultural settings where her Anglo ethnicity, English language and pale skin colour clearly marked her as other than mainstream. In spite of this difference within the research team, however, we are, as a group, positioned as relatively powerful speaking subjects in the research and university system in Victoria. Our university Ethics committee, for instance, condones our practice. In the field of secondary teaching, though, we are powerless to speak at all: we may not even ask our questions.

Who'll answer the questions?

Even though our project has not yet begun, we have already journeyed a great distance, and learned a great deal. Our inability to move forward, to negotiate and deal with government instrumentalities in this case, suggests that, in contesting the discursive norms and truths

of that field, from within our own, we may have constituted ourselves as Other (and dangerous) within that field. We don't know who was reading our submissions, we don't know how they were able to read them from their own positions, and we are certainly only beginning to get to know the relational space from which we might be able to gain a speaking position in the institutional discourse of Victorian secondary schooling. We want to ask our questions. We think they are important questions to ask, and we will continue to try to address this as a problem. In a pilot interview, Elizabeth warned us that silence, and a lack of critical questioning much more comfortable for many of those who are inside the teaching profession at the present time.

And the more people talk the more people get upset, the more people get agitated, and the whole place actually not get happy, and the whole situation change,

(Elizabeth, September 1997)

But her words also remind us that if the problem of under-representation of ethnic minorities in the teaching profession in Australia is to be addressed effectively, then people have to talk, and the questions do have to be asked.

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