Exploring possibilities through critical race theory: Exemplary pedagogical practices for Indigenous students

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This paper draws from a research project designed to investigate exemplary pedagogical practices for Indigenous students in a secondary school in northern Australia. In the paper, I examine the contribution that critical race theory (Ladson-Billings, 1998, 1999, 2000) can make to understandings of the experiences of Indigenous students in Australian schools, which continue to be a site of both struggle and possibility for Indigenous people. Recent government reports (Department of Education Science and Training, 2002; Yunupingu, 1995) have concluded that there have been considerable improvements in the educational status of Indigenous Australians since the introduction of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (Department of Employment Education and Training, 1989). However, inequities remain. These inequities are clearly evident in the area of secondary education where, for example, in 2001 the national retention rates to Year 12 for Indigenous students who were in Year 10 in 1999 was 43.6% compared to 76.2% for non-Indigenous students (Department of Education Science and Training, 2002). This failure of Australian schools to provide Indigenous students with outcomes at the same levels as their non-indigenous counterparts provides a ongoing challenge to the legitimacy of Australian educational systems and their assumptions and an ongoing challenge to educational researchers committed to social justice.

I begin by surveying critical race theory in educational theorising and research in the United States. I then draw on two “counter-stories” from research which aims to both privilege Indigenous students and their families as expert knowers in their own education and, at the same time, through observations and interviews of selected teachers, offer concrete guidelines for teachers committed to making a critical difference. I use these counter-stories to illustrate the possible potential of critical race theory in Australian educational contexts.

Critical race theory in the United States
Critical race theory along with related theories including LatCrit, Asian critical theory, Tribal critical theory, and critical race feminism (Bernal, Villalpando, Brayboy, & Thompson, 2003) drew from and extended the broad field of critical theory (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). Critical race theory explicitly focuses on social inequalities arising through race and racism. Initially developed by scholars of colour working in academic legal circles in the United States, critical race theory grew out of dissatisfaction with the extremely slow rate of real racial reform since the growth of the civil rights movement (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Critical race theory is characterised by four tenets. First, critical race theory works to name and discuss the daily realities of racism and expose how racism continues to privilege whites and disadvantage people of colour. Secondly, it legitimates and promotes the voices of people of colour by using storytelling to integrate experiential knowledge drawn from a shared history as ‘the other’ into critiques of dominant social orders. Thirdly, critical race theory insists on critiquing
liberalism, particularly the notion that meaningful social change can occur without radical change to existing social structures. Related to the critique of liberalism, critical race theory questions the efficacy of much of the civil rights legislation enacted in the United States, arguing that, rather than reducing the effects of racism on people of colour, the primary beneficiaries of this legislation have been whites (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Nebeker, 1998).

It was the publication of Ladson-Billings & Tate’s (1995) article, *Towards a critical race theory of education*, which first brought critical race theory to the attention of the education academy. This was followed by special issues on critical race theory in the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* in 1998 and in *Qualitative Inquiry* in 2002, plus inclusion of chapters by critical race theorists in the *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Ladson-Billings, 2000) and the *Handbook of Interview Research* (Dunbar Jr, Rodriguez, & Parker, 2002), further exposing qualitative researchers in education to critical race theory. In these publications, critical race theory is examined for its potential as a lens through which educational practices and policies can be investigated (Ladson-Billings, 1999) and as a methodological tool that can reveal “greater ontological and epistemological understanding of how race and racism affect the education and lives of the racially disenfranchised” (Parker & Lynn, 2002, pp. 7-8).

In keeping with researchers working in the general field of critical educational studies, critical race theorists in education are committed to social justice as a general principle, but particularly acknowledge the pervasiveness of race and racism in the ongoing experiences of students of colour and in the structures and practices of educational institutions. As Ladson-Billings (1998, p. 8) notes,

> despite the scientific refutation of race as a legitimate biological concept and attempts to marginalise race in much of the public, political discourse, race continues to be a powerful social construct and signifier. Thus, a key component of the work of educational researchers working with critical race theory is to discuss and define race and racism in specific historical and social contexts, recognising that race is seen as a pre-eminently sociohistorical concept (Omi & Winant, 1986, p. 60) and that racism is more than just acts of individual prejudice. Rather, it is seem as an endemic part of life, deeply ingrained in the education system through historical consciousness and ideological choices about race (Parker & Lynn, 2002). Race may be a social construct but it has material effects on real people. Here, critical race theory’s beginnings in legal studies focuses our attention on the role that the law has played in racialising people and in legal constructions of citizenship, which in turn lead to educational entitlements.

According to Solorzano & Yosso (2002, pp. 36-37),

> critical race methodology in education focuses research on how students of colour experience and respond to the U.S. educational system. From developing research questions to collecting, analysing, and presenting data, critical race methodology centres on students of colour. By placing the marginalised participant at the centre of analysis, critical research methodology focuses on capturing the stories, counter-stories, and
narratives of marginalised students of colour (Fernandez, 2002, p. 46). Ladson-Billings (1998, p. 14) claims that storytelling or “naming one’s own reality” provides for the “psychic preservation of marginalised groups” who internalise white condemnation of themselves. Storytelling has been a “kind of medicine to heal the wounds of pain caused by racial oppression”.

Storytelling from marginalised students of colour provides powerful counter-stories, challenging the “majoritarian stories” which make white educational privilege appear natural (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Ladson-Billings (2000, p. 262) posits that storytelling from those constructed as other have a perspective advantage in that not being in the centre allows a “wide angle” vision. This “liminal perspective” reveals the ways that “dominant perspectives distort the realities of the other in an effort to maintain power relations that continue to disadvantage those who are locked out of the mainstream” (p. 263). These counter-stories can also affect the oppressor, catalysing the “necessary cognitive conflict to jar white dysconscious racism” (Ladson-Billings, 1998 p. 14). Thus, counter-stories are epistemologically valuable in understanding schooling in order to transform it. “The voice of people of colour is required for a deep understanding of the education system” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 14). Hence, following Bernal (2002), critical race theory is about learning to listen to other people’s counter-stories and finding ways to make them matter with the education system and within educational research.

In recent years, critical theory has benefited from conversations with postmodernism, poststructuralism, feminisms and post colonialism (McLaren & Kincheloe, 1997, p. 52). Similarly, critical race theory, has echoes of these conversations in its parallels to feminist searches for a feminist methodology (Lynn, Yosso, Solorzano, & Parker, 2002, p. 5), in its use of storytelling and in its privileging of the voices of “the other”. Indeed, as Parker notes, there may be some scepticism about whether critical race theory can add anything different to current epistemological and methodological approaches to investigating issues of social justice in education. However, he argues that the critical centring of race (together with social class, gender, sexual orientation, and other areas of difference) at the locations where the research is conducted and discussions are held can serve as a major link between fully understanding the historical vestiges of discrimination and the present-day racial manifestations of that discrimination. (Parker, 1998, p. 46)

Critical race theorists also acknowledge that postmodern and other critical educational researchers may be uncomfortable with critical race theory on the grounds that its focus on race essentialises people of colour (Bernal, 2002, p. 118). Rather, it is in the interests of critical race theorists to expose how dominant Euro-American ideology and epistemologies have forced an essentialised and totalising identity onto those positioned as other. Instead, as Solorzano & Yosso (2002, p. 25) posit:

although race and racism are at the center of a critical race analysis, we also view them at their intersection with other forms of subordination such as gender and class discrimination.

While recognizing layers of subordination based on race, gender, class, immigration status, surname, phenotype, accent, and sexuality will lead to
different experiences for a wide range of people of colour, Ladson-Billings (2000, p. 262) argues that what people of colour have in common is the “experience of a racialised identity”. Thus, while rejecting an essentialised racial identity, Ladson-Billings argues that people use racialised labels for political and cultural purposes whereby identification with these labels means acknowledgement of some of the common experiences that group members share as outsiders and others.

To date, critical race theory in educational research has been used to expose racism within existing educational practices and policies. Much of this research has focused on the experiences of people of colour as students and faculty in secondary or higher education (Bernal, 2002; Fernandez, 2002; Solorzano, 1998; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Others have used critical race theory as a basis for critiquing specific legal cases in education (Parker, 1998; Villenas, Deyhle, & Parker, 1999) while Duncan, (2002), Ladson-Billings (1999) and Solorzano & Bernal (2001) have used critical race theory to examine practices for preparing teachers to teach culturally diverse students. These research projects are all situated in the United States. While the United States and Australia share some similarities as settler-coloniser countries in which English has become the official language, the United States and Australia have very different histories. However, in both countries, race has played a fundamental role shaping relationships of power and notions of citizenship through inclusions and exclusions. This suggests that it is worth exploring critical race theory in educational research in Australian contexts.

**Researhing exemplary teaching for Indigenous students**

In this section I discuss the development of a research project focusing on exemplary teaching for Indigenous students in a secondary school in an urban centre in northern Australia. The school, which I will call Bay High, is a small state secondary school with an enrolment of around 620 students of whom 20% identified as Indigenous. Initially, I had been invited into the school by the school’s Indigenous Education Worker and principal to help them explore ways to improve the academic outcomes of the Indigenous students. In undertaking this work, I drew on the extensive research literature conducted within a critical educational studies framework which had exposed the ways in which schools reproduce social inequalities (Weis & Fine, 2001). However, I was particularly influenced by the work of Ladson-Billings (1994) who studied a group of “excellent teachers” so providing “exemplars of effective teaching for African American students” (p. x), a study which inspired many of teacher education students I teach. Hence, the current research project was framed around the question “what is exemplary teaching practice for Indigenous students”. This particular research question clearly located the “problem” in the work of teachers in classrooms, rather than in the cultures of Indigenous students and their families. As well, it had the potential to offer concrete guidelines for practice for teachers committed to making a critical difference. The design of the research project was contextualised in concerns about the role of schools in the context of an unequal society (Carspecken & Apple, 1992, p. 510) and the ongoing problematising of the theoretical parameters of Indigenous education, and its possible reproductive tendencies (Nakata, 2001b, p. 100).
Given the research focus on exemplary teaching for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, a key task was the selection of the teachers to study. Here, rather than pre-judging what the characteristics of such teachers might be, I relied on teacher reputation through a community nomination process (Foster in Ladson-Billings, 1994) where the researcher relies on community members to judge people, places and things within their own setting. That is, the Indigenous Education Worker and I asked Indigenous students and families at Bay High which teachers would be worth studying. In this way, the research design recognised Indigenous parents and students as expert knowers in their own education. The research design further recognising the expertise of Indigenous students and their families through interviews which explored their ideas and understandings about what constituted good teaching for Indigenous students. This information then formed the basis of the analysis of observations and interviews of those teachers which Indigenous students and families identified as exemplary.

Critical race theory as a situated response
In organising students and families to interview for this research project, the Indigenous Education Worker and I used purposeful sampling to ensure we capture the diversity of families at Bay High – and we were stunned by the variety of backgrounds, variety of experiences and the layers of identity. Some families identify strongly with specific islands in the Torres Strait. Some identify as the traditional owners of the land on which the school and its community are built. Some identify with Aboriginal groups from other areas of the state and country. Many claim a multiple Indigenous identity, e.g., Kunggandji and Birri-gubba, or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. Many acknowledge both their traditional alliances to country and their more recent identification with particular missions and reserves. Some specifically identify with the history of Indigenous resistance and activism in their families. They generally acknowledge the non-Indigenous people in their families, both historically and contemporarily. As well, they claim multiple identities based on a range of other factors – church affiliation, sporting and leisure interests, membership of community organizations, etc. Some of these identities are shared across generations, others are based on age and gender. Rather than an undifferentiated group, they were, as individuals and as families, located along socio-economic, language, gender, historical, age and other intersections, occupying a range of positionings, although disproportionately represented on specific dimensions of disadvantage (Nakata, 2001a, p. 5).

In recognition of this diversity, interviews were conducted by a range of interviewers and in a range of contexts. As the interviews were planned and conducted, I wondered if there were any commonalities among the research participants. At the same time, I began reading more of Ladson-Billings’ work which lead me into the area of critical race theory. However, its specific focus in the United States made me sceptical of its relevance to my own work – until I started to read the interview transcripts. The family interviews in particular discussed good teaching for Indigenous students by telling stories of their negative experiences. These stories revealed common experiences of the racialisation of Indigenous people with Australian society and suggested that
further consideration of critical race theory may be worthwhile, as evident in
the following two stories arising from the interviews

The following story was told to Bill, one of the interviewers, by an Aboriginal
man who chose to be called Rasta. Rasta, a cousin of Bill’s was born with a
mild form of cerebral palsy. He currently works as a liaison office and has
played a key role in re-establishing his family’s connections to their traditional
country. His son, called Marley here, reflecting his father’s love of reggae, is in
Grade 9 at Bay High. Rasta links experiences of being placed in a home,
experiences of being labelled as “intellectually disabled”, and his participation
in his son’s schooling to his racialised position within the wider society. He
also talks about one of the teachers in the study.

You know, bro.
They put me in that home for years.
I only got out for holidays.
It wasn’t good enough for them
just to send me to a special school.
They had to take me away
even though it was only a couple of k’s away.
Just far enough away to hurt.
And Mum didn’t know how to fight them.
Too many picaninis in her family taken away,
including her.

In that home,
well, I knew I wasn’t dumb.
I wasn’t dumb at home
but I learnt to be dumb there.
We got used to most of the kids being Murris (Aboriginal).
When they’d bring in a Migaloo (white person)
We’d say,
Eh! you must be real dumb
to be white
and in here.

So I’m not really qualified to talk about education.
I don’t go near the school.
It wouldn’t help my boy.
In our family
and when I’m up home
I’m just Rasta.
But outside of that
people look at how I walk.
Just another drunken black.
I know it’s hard for Marley
because of how people look at me.
So, they probably think I don’t care.
I’m a good worker, eh
- better than you, bro
and a good father. 
But teachers would just look at how I am 
and think my boy must be a dumb black 
just like his dad.

But a while back 
Mum conned Marl and me into going to church 
I had no budgeroo (money) so we were doing nothing. 
So there we were 
when this Migaloo comes up. 
Turn’s out he’s Marley’s maths teacher 
We started yarning and he tell’s me how well Marley was doing. 
And how Marl had told him about going back to country. 
Hey, I thought, 
if Marl’s telling him that stuff, 
this fella’s alright. 
So, we ended up going fishing.

I’m still not going up to that school 
but now I can connect through Dennis.

While the family interviews elicited stories which revealed intergenerational 
aspects of their racialised identities, students’ stories frequently referred to 
tensions between the non-Indigenous students and the Indigenous students 
caused by the apparent differential treatment of Indigenous students based on 
specific Indigenous funding. For these Indigenous students, programs 
designed to address the specific educational disadvantage of Indigenous 
people contributed to their continued racialisation and othering within the 
school and the way in which teachers talked about and supported these 
programs contribute to how the students evaluated them as teachers. The 
following story was told to Alinta, a young Aboriginal interviewer who had 
recently graduated from the school, by Grade 9 boys, one of whom identifies 
as Aboriginal, the other as Torres Strait Islander.

That Miss Perry! 
Yeh, we went in and said 
“No Miss, we can’t do that oral presentation. 
We’d be shamed. 
And she looked all wet and said, 
“That’s OK, we’ll work something else out.”
And we knew she was thinking “poor dumb blacks”. 
But we were all ready to do it. 
But you’ve got to pretend you don’t want to so they don’t say you’re 
sucking up. 
And one of those metal-head white kids said, 
“How come they can get out of it when we have to do it.”
And all Miss Perry says is 
real polite-like 
“That’s enough now, Greg” 
Yeh, we’d had ‘nough now.
But that always happens, 
those white kids thinking Murris get away with stuff.  
Or we get everything for free 
Yeh, we wish. 
The boys were given a mark of zero for the presentation.

These two stories, like others in this research project, revealed common experiences of the racialisation of Indigenous people within Australian schools and society, making the links to critical race theory apparent. Thus, the use of critical race theory can be described as a “situated response” to the dynamics of the research process (Hermes, 1998). The interviews and critical race theory’s attention to the role of law in the racialisation of people of colour was evident in the ongoing influence of being “under the act”, as evident in Rasta’s story. The Act was in reality a series of acts dating back to 1897 in this state. Ostensibly aimed at “protecting” Indigenous people from the effects of colonisation, these acts severely restricted economic, educational, cultural and civil rights of Indigenous people. They subjected people to excessive surveillance and control by minor officials and provided the basis for the system of missions and reserves to which Indigenous people were “sentenced” (Kidd, 1997). Those Indigenous people who were exempted were constantly influenced by the possibility of being placed under the act. The acts also provided the legal framework for the ‘stolen generations’ and the many of the families at Bay High, like Rasta’s, experienced the intergenerational effects of children being taken away.

Drawing on counter-stories to investigate exemplary teaching practice

The counter-stories based on the lived experiences of Indigenous students and their families at Bay High provide the “deep understanding” that is fundamental in any evaluation of what constitutes exemplary teaching for Indigenous students. Thus, in this research project, I used the counter-stories told by the Indigenous participants in my observations, interviews and analysis of the four teachers recognised as exemplary by the students and their families.

As one brief example, the practices of one of the teachers identified as exemplary, Simon Fraser, contrasted with the students’ experiences with Miss Perry. Simon reported that many teachers had trouble getting Indigenous students to participate in assessment based on oral presentations, and some saw it as culturally insensitive to make them engage in this activity. Simon believed that the reluctance to participate was more due to their concerns about how their peers would respond to their presentations, a concern exacerbated by their sense of “otherness” as well as by some uncertainty about requirements and, for some students who spoke a language other than Standard Australian English at home, a concern about their English competence. Thus he set up a detailed plan that, although designed specifically with the needs of Indigenous students in mind, provided all students in his Grade 8 class with opportunities to build up their confidence before presenting in front of the whole class. This included opportunities to do presentations in front of a small group of peers or adults selected by the students and/or prerecording the presentation on video, provided they
presented in front of the whole class at least once before the end of year. He encouraged the students to pick personally meaningful topics and he ensured they had adequate resources for preparation He consulted with the Indigenous Education Worker who then helped students make appropriate decisions about which options to take. He made time in and out of class to ensure students were progressing well in their preparations. He had worked over the year to ensure that students were supportive audiences for the oral presentations of their peers. So, when Leticia and Naomi, two Torres Strait Islander students, were timetabled for their first whole class presentation, they had already completed one oral assessment task in front of Simon, the Indigenous Education Worker and two other Torres Strait Islander women from the Indigenous parent group. Simon had seen the preparation for their whole class presentation twice, helped them organise the presentation to make use of their different talents, given feedback on an audiotaped rehearsal and, so, was confident they were prepared and ready. When, in class, the girls hesitated before the presentation, Simon joked with them that if they did not present, he would be forced to sing Achy Breaky Heart, their shared worst song of all time, instead. Then, from the back of the room, he offered much non verbal support as the two girls demonstrated their competency as critical readers of gendered and raced advertisements for fast foods.

While the counter-stories provided by the Indigenous students and their families are valuable in and of themselves, using them to read teaching practices of teachers deemed to be exemplary provides a way of making these practices visible to other teachers and potential teachers. As the example from Simon indicates, these can be translated into specific professional practices which work against both essentialised notions of Indigenous identity and the reproductive tendencies of taken-for-granted responses to these essentialised identities. They provide teachers committed to a more egalitarian society, as well as teachers just concerned to do a better job, with examples to follow. These examples, rather than provide quick tips, reflect the complex, situated and ongoing professional nature of exemplary teaching practices.

**Conclusion**

The failure of Australian schools to deliver educational equity for Indigenous students should be — no, must be - an ongoing concern for all Australian educational researchers. This paper has explored the possible contribution that critical race theory can make to research projects investigating the experiences of Indigenous students in Australian schools. The two counter-stories presented here indicate that race and racism remains a significant factor in the education of Indigenous students, a factor which cuts across the diversity of experience of Indigenous people. As well, critical race theory should remind Australian researchers to draw on the specific experiential and subjugated knowledges of Indigenous Australians (Moreton-Robinson, 2000) expressed in academic scholarship, community discourses and in public expression through the arts to examine the persistence of race and racism within Australian society, a persistence often denied in a society where a “mania for formal equality” contributes to the insidious denial of racism which infiltrates policy and political discourse (Jonas, 2002).
Critical race theory remains relatively unacknowledged within Australian research and the scope of this paper limits a full discussion of its potentials. However, I consider that it can provide an additional theoretical and methodological tool whereby educators learn to listen to the counter-stories of Indigenous students and their families and find ways to make these stories matter with the education system and within educational research.


