

Troubling identities: teacher education students' constructions of class and ethnicity.

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Abstract

This paper reports on a research project that explored how student teachers understand ethnic and classed difference as it relates to themselves and their students. Discourses of schooling can shape students ethnic and classed identities, frequently positioning non-mainstream students as 'other' and marginalizing them. Significant numbers of our teacher education students have limited experience of diverse educational settings, having mainly attended white middle-class schools as students and as student teachers. Working with diverse student populations productively depends on teachers recognising and valuing difference. The ways in which they engage with students whose ethnic and classed identities are different from their own is important in creating learning environments that build on and engage with diversity.

In a preliminary stage of the research we asked eight third-year teacher education students to explore their own ethnic and classed identities. The complexities of identity are foregrounded in both the assumptions we made in selecting particular students for the project and in the ways they did (not) think about themselves as having ethnic or classed identities.

In this paper we draw on these findings to interrogate how categories of identity are fluid, shifting and ongoing processes of negotiation: troubling and complex. We also consider the implications for teacher education.

Introduction

The importance of education as both a site of and a powerful mediator in the shaping of ethnic, classed and gendered identities has been the subject of extensive research both in Australia and overseas (Olmedo, 1997; Echols and Stader, 2002, Tsolidis, 2001, McLeod and Yates, 2003, Youdell 2003) The expectations that teachers in Australia can plan for and work with diverse student populations are reflected in a number of national and state education policies (e.g. Department of Education, 1997; Ministerial Committee on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 1997; MCEETYA 2000; National Board of Education, Employment and Training, 1995).

Australia is one of the most ethnically diverse nations in the world (Howe 1999) with 25% of all students having a Language Background Other Than English (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002). Yet, the teaching population is overwhelmingly Anglo-Australian (Rizvi 1992; Santoro et al. 2001). While policies and theoretical literature emphasise the importance of engaging with student's ethnic and class identities, we know little about how teachers make sense of this imperative or how teacher-education students construct their own socio-cultural positionings.

Like those already in the profession, the majority of teacher education students at many Australian universities have attended middle-class Anglo-Australian schools for their primary and secondary education. This means that opportunities to engage with others from different cultural, linguistic and classed backgrounds in their schooling and current teacher education tutorials and lectures is minimal. At Deakin University's Burwood campus located in the leafy eastern suburbs of Melbourne, this homogeneity of experience can continue. For example, in their practicum they often—but not always, are placed in schools not very different from their personal schooling experiences. Frequently, teacher-education students in our Faculty of Education express little interest in teaching in schools where the students have different racial and ethnic backgrounds to their own. This lack of interest is sometimes motivated by fear of the unfamiliar and in part, due to the ways in which teaching for diversity is generally taken up in teacher education. Too often, when markers of identity such as 'gender, ethnicity, race, class' etc are examined, the focus is on developing student-teachers' understandings of how these discourses shape *learner* identities and rarely explores how these *also* shape *teachers'* identities. This leaves subjectivities of teacher education students untouched and unexamined and serves to position students of ethnic and classed difference too often as 'problems' to be 'managed' and if possible, avoided.

The project reported on here grew from our own experiences and concerns to ensure that our graduates are well prepared to teach in diverse settings. Firstly, as former *teachers* we have worked with predominantly non-Anglo Australian students, many of whom were also on Education Maintenance Allowance. Because of these experiences we were aware of how 'disadvantage' can be constructed and reconstructed through pedagogy and curriculum. We frequently saw how 'mainstream' ways of knowing were privileged and how this often marginalized our students of Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE). Secondly, as *teacher educators*, working mainly with Anglo-Australian middle-class university students, we have become aware of the often taken-for-granted beliefs that our university students have about themselves as belonging to the 'norm'. For example, many students claim that they achieve their academic success solely through 'individual effort'. What is rarely understood is how their own privileged class status and Anglo-Australian-ness locates them securely in mainstream discourses. The view from the center of the hegemonic culture leaves them unable to see how 'those' outside the dominant discourses are marginalised.

Additionally, in tutorial discussions about difference and disadvantage in education, it is apparent that our students often see those from LBOTE as the 'exotic other'. That is, some of our students see non Anglo-Australians as the ones who have a 'culture' or an

‘ethnicity’, frequently constructing themselves as ‘only Australian’. However, this exoticising of ‘the other’ is a double-edged sword. Firstly, it highlights the new and exciting aspects of difference. However, in doing so, the exotic other is inadvertently constructed in opposition to the mainstream, and the ‘normality’ associated with membership of the mainstream. This mainstream which our students understand to be ‘only Australian’ can also be read as the ‘real Australian’ (Tsolidis 2001). Furthermore, while the ‘other’ might be viewed as exotic and exciting in certain contexts, their ‘differences’ may create problems that student teachers believe have to be overcome. Therefore, the ‘exotic other’ becomes understood as deficit.

None of these ways of making sense of ‘difference’ and diversity seem to us to be particularly productive or helpful in enabling student-teachers to engage with cultural and classed differences in new ways. To begin to think about how we might engage our students with these challenges, we designed a project to investigate how teacher education students construct their own identities around understandings of ethnicity and socio-economic class. In doing so, we sought to problematise what constitutes ‘mainstream’ and notions of difference.

Recent theorising about ‘identity categories’ has challenged traditional and essentialist constructs of gender, ethnicity, ‘race’ and class (Weedon, 1999; Twine, 1997; Tsolidis, 2001; Scott, 2000). In our own research (Allard, 1999; 2001; Santoro, 2002; 2003), we have explored identities as fluid, dynamic, changing and changeable, in different contexts and times. As we do not see our students’ identities as fixed and certain we sought a means to ‘trouble’ students’ taken-for-granted certainties, and to disrupt their senses of ‘self’ in ways that would be productive. We also recognize the difficulties of stepping outside the ‘centre’, and trying to see life from the margins. According to researchers such as Britzman (1991) and Causey et al. (2000) a way of helping pre-service teacher-education students is to begin from their personal constructs. We also recognise however, that this is an extraordinarily difficult task, not just for our students, but for anyone.

The participants in the research were eight secondary teacher education students in their third year of study with whom we worked as they prepared for, undertook and debriefed from their three-week practicum experience.

Our research design which we discuss in more detail later, included an introductory focus group conducted before the student teachers were placed in one of two inner city schools¹. Both of the schools had ethnically diverse student populations - most students received Education Maintenance Allowance. As researchers, we visited the participants during their practicum; they also kept journals in which they recorded their experiences and reflections. Each participant was interviewed individually at the end of their practicum. All eight were brought together again for a final focus group to share and reflect on their experiences.

In the following section, we discuss how we set out to ‘trouble’ understandings of identities (class, ethnicity) and how we also came to troubling realisations about our own

¹ Pseudonyms have been used throughout for the schools and participants

assumptions of ‘class’ and ‘ethnicity’ as markers of identity.

Troubling our own assumptions

Because of this project’s focus, we sought to choose eight ‘middle-class’ Anglo-Australian student-teachers whose own schooling experiences as well as their practicum experiences had been in middle-class Anglo-Australian settings. In selecting participants from the cultural majority of the student population at Deakin University, we aimed to trouble understandings of ethnicity and class held by the dominant student cohort (that is, the ‘insiders’). Given the demographics of the student population at Deakin, Faculty of Education, we thought this would be a relatively straightforward task. We designed an Expression of Interest Form in which students entered their name, contact details and the name of their secondary school as well as the school where they had done their previous practicum.

After receiving replies from twenty-four students we selected eight students, two male and six female on the basis of the information provided. Susan was one of the students selected. On her form she named an Eastern suburbs non-government school as the place she completed her secondary education. She specified that she had worked in an eastern suburbs school for her last practicum. Her first name appeared to locate her as Anglo-Australian, and her surname suggested that she was possibly of German heritage. However, at our first focus group, we were surprised to find that Susan was in fact not ‘white’, Anglo-Australian but of Sri Lankan heritage. In our haste to pin down the ‘right’ research participants, we had naively failed to take into account the complexities of ethnic identity and the ways in which it is “constantly (re)invented and (re)negotiated” (Ang 1993, p. 14), and the ways in which immigration, shifting national boundaries can unsettle and disrupt taken-for-granted assumptions about ethnicity.

As we reflect on this experience, we wonder whether it was our taken-for-granted assumptions about her secondary school as ‘middle-class’ that shaped our view of her as ‘white’ ie, a member of the dominant Anglo majority? What assumptions were we making about the sorts of students who attended such a school? Do only Anglo-Australian, along with maybe a handful of ‘international’ (that is, privileged Asian) students, attend non-government schools in the eastern suburbs? On the basis of her surname, we considered briefly that she might have been of German background; however, clearly from our reading this possibility did not make her different *enough* to be *too* different. If she had had a Chinese or an Arabic name, would we have made such an assumption? Would she have been ‘disqualified’ on that basis for our project? It is interrogating our own subjective assumptions that lead us to better understand the complexities around difference that confront our students’ experiences of ‘others’. This experience demonstrates again that as researchers, our values and understandings are embedded implicitly in the projects through which we seek to better understand others.

We tell this story to highlight the multifaceted dimensions of ‘identities’ and the challenges of ‘praxis’ (Stanley, 1990). As researchers we understand the difficulties of defining ethnicity and class and have often problematised these in our work. Elsewhere (Allard, 2002; Santoro, 2002), we have interrogated how such a categorisation is made to

represent a variety of different meanings, depending on who is speaking and who is spoken about. That is, 'ethnicity' can be used as a marker of national 'belonging', of 'culture', of country of birth, or language spoken, as examples. Similarly, we are also aware of the multiple meanings re-presented in the phrase 'social class' (Santoro, 2003).

Troubling Ethnicity

The focus group was the first time that all eight student teachers came together with us. Most of the students had not met each other before and we had not met any of them. We opened the discussion by introducing ourselves, highlighting how we understood our own ethnic and classed identities and spoke about why we saw the project as being important to teacher education in general. We asked students to introduce themselves and discuss how they understood themselves as having an ethnicity and class. At this point, it came as some surprise to find that four of them said they'd never been asked to think about this before. Susan, however, had a very different and clearly articulated point of view. As the only student there whose skin colour clearly signed her as not 'belonging' to the Anglo-Australian majority, 'ethnicity' was a dimension of her identity of which she was constantly reminded. She made this clear to the group when she said, 'I'm tired of being asked 'Where do you come from?'' Whereas for many of the other students, talking about their own ethnicity and class was a challenging experience, from what Susan said, the focus on ethnicity was too often part of her experience of being 'othered'. The child of immigrants, both of whom came from Sri Lanka, she talked about her resentment of being questioned by people she met for the first time who automatically assumed that she, due to the colour of her skin, had been born 'elsewhere'. Her disclosure initiated discussion amongst the group about the taken-for-granted assumptions that operate regarding skin colour and culture, culture and nationality, and indeed about culture and socio-economic class. Susan's comments provided a means to begin troubling their understandings of ethnicity, nationality and 'Australianness', starting from their own assumptions.

During her three-week practicum, Susan was again asked "where do you come from?" by her Year 11 students at Market Secondary College. In reflecting upon this incident she writes in her journal:

I was surprised today when a Year 11 student asked me 'Where do you come from? Are you Indian?' I was stunned and didn't expect a question like that. I responded with:

Me: I'm Australian

Student: You don't look Aussie.

Me: How does an Aussie look?

Student: Are you Brazilian?

Me: Should I open the betting ring now? Anyone else want to guess? Seriously, my parents are from Sri Lanka.

Student: You don't look Sri Lankan, you're not that dark.

How the hell does a person respond to that? In retrospect, although the

‘moment’ was not tense, I could have questioned the students more but I was a little flabbergasted at the question at the time.

One interpretation of this exchange and her reflection on it is that the question itself is not what surprises Susan. After all, she is ‘used to’ being asked that. Rather, she is surprised that students, many of whom are born ‘elsewhere’, have dared to ask this. Perhaps, in her eyes, since many were recent migrants, she sees them as other and is shocked to learn that they see her, the Australian-born, in the same way. A second interpretation is that what so surprises Susan is the ‘inappropriate’ questioning of a ‘teacher’ by a student. Her response is to initially refuse to provide the information requested and to claim for herself the status of Australian. She refuses to be constructed as ‘other’ and deflects attention away by asking the student to define ‘Australianness’. When the student persists in trying to categorise Susan, she again resists, resorting to humour before finally conceding that her parents were born elsewhere. The stereotype concerning what a ‘real’ Sri Lankan looks like, and one that Susan is clearly tired of still persists in the way the student positions Susan as ‘other’ regardless of her claim of legitimacy.

Susan’s response reminds us of Nado Aveling’s reaction to being asked the same question by people curious about her ‘exotic’ and different appearance. She says, “...I cringe ever time I am asked, ‘Where do you come from?’ People always ask. Sometimes I parry the question, sometimes I tell them I come from Fremantle (wrong answer), sometimes I become irritated and tell them to mind their own business (wrong answer gain)” (2001, p.38).

Susan’s discussion at the initial Focus Group about her experiences and feelings of being ‘othered’ became the catalyst for much dialogue and reflection among the rest of the group. For example, Kylie and Sally, fellow participants, both commented in their interviews about the impact of Susan’s views on their thinking. Sally, commenting on the ethnicity of her students at Market Secondary, said:

Sally: I didn’t know what part of Asia they came from, and you feel like it’s a bit politically incorrect to ask.

Ninetta: Why? Why do you say that?

Sally: Because it’s so bound up, I think this whole cultural diversity thing is so bound up in political correctness, that everybody forgets about the fact that its ok to ask somebody where they are from. But then people like Susan says she hates it when people say ‘where are you from?’ I think its better to say ‘what cultural background do you have?’ or something, I don’t know, but ... as a teacher you do want to know that kind of stuff.

While Sally recognises the legitimacy of Susan’s frustration, nevertheless she believes it is important to get to know her students, including something of their cultural backgrounds. However, she struggles with how to gain information and, because of Susan’s comments, begins to recognise that asking someone ‘where are you from?’

constructs them as an outsider. She seeks a way around this and suggests a focus on cultural background as a way of recognizing difference without 'othering'.

Kylie, another participant, also claims that Susan's comments have impressed upon her the need for sensitivity when working cross-culturally. She states that she felt 'awkward' asking her students about their cultures because of Susan's expressed resentment. However, since she often stated in her journal and interview that she believes everyone is essentially 'the same', Kylie may not feel the same need as Sally to understand her students' backgrounds. She may see little reason to seek information about them (because they're "all the same") and hears Susan's complaint as a justification to avoid doing so.

This explanation that students use to negate difference, and/or to manage the fear that 'difference' sometimes evokes, allows them to position themselves within a key Australian discourse, that of egalitarianism. By insisting that any difference doesn't *really* matter, they are able to avoid confronting the challenges of teaching for difference, and of acknowledging that some differences DO matter (Delpit 1995). Such differences can shape how people will see the world, make sense of new knowledge and indeed can work to impact on life chances.

Troubling Class

While 'socio economic status' is always a difficult concept to clarify, in our selection procedures as already noted we attempted to select students who attended a range of schools, particularly ones located in the affluent, middle-class areas of the Eastern suburbs. Choosing participants using only this criterion is of course a limited 'reading' of class—that is, tied mainly to financial status, and perhaps educational aspirations. Nevertheless, it was one indicator that we saw as somewhat reliable.

Asking the participants to describe their socio economic status was one of the questions considered in the focus group discussion. What emerged through the conversation was that despite wide differences in geographical locations, parental occupations and educational levels, or their different ages, all of the eight participants named themselves as middle-class or lower middle-class. The discussion proved to be an illuminating one. For example, Kylie, in defining herself and family as 'middle-class' did so by arguing that her family had 'earned everything we've got...we're not one of those hanging around waiting for hand-outs' in terms of welfare. Her mother was trained as a nurse and her father worked as a labourer in a provincial town in Tasmania. While we heard this as 'working-class', Kylie's definition of 'class' seemed to suggest that a) people not on welfare were independent contributors to society, and therefore, 'middle-class' and b) people on welfare were 'bludgers' and therefore couldn't be middle-class.

This prompted a response from one of the other participants, Helen, a mature age student and single mother living in a housing commission flat on a government benefit while she studied. Helen declared herself as 'middle-class' due to her family background, (German

migrants) and her mother's aspirations for her. She challenged Kylie's moral stance that those who took welfare were bludgers and members of the 'underclass'. The fact that Helen was currently on a government pension was NOT because she was a bludger but because she had made a 'mistake' in marrying a drug addict who had since left her and her children. For Helen, class wasn't about financial affluence, or lack of, but about values and aspirations. We wondered whether, for Helen, becoming a teacher would confirm her self-image as being middle-class and relocate her in the class to which she lay claim.

Within the focus group, the personal discussions provided opportunities to explore how 'fluid' the notion of class is, how personal values and moral judgments can operate to exclude or misinterpret other people's perspectives, and how by making different ideas explicit we can begin to trouble the taken-for-granted assumptions that people bring concerning questions of class identities.

Another interesting example concerning 'class' was how Susan commented on her own class positioning in relation to those of her 'inner city' students. When asked about how the practicum at Market Secondary College made her more aware of her ethnicity and class, she replied:

I think it made me aware of my own class more than ethnicity. I think it has. Just going in there and your eyes are open to what happens on the other side. You can only imagine or read about things in a magazine or newspaper, but to really experience it is different from going through it and to have that idea that they have gone home - not into a home - they have gone into a place really. Yet I can catch a train out and come home for a dinner.

We hear in Susan's comments a set of binaries that set her experiences of 'home' and 'place' in opposition to those of her students. She can go home—they go into a 'place'—not a real home. Where they 'go' (but not live) is the stuff of the tabloids, the place of crime – horror depicted in newspapers daily. Her use of the phrase 'catch a train out' suggests that she knows that she has a choice to leave and exercises it. In contrast she sees her students as entrapped and having no choice.

Additionally in some ways, Susan appears to take for granted her right to make a judgment about the students' home from a middle-class position – a positionings which to her is invisible. Middle-classness, like whiteness, has a normative sense about it and remains largely unexamined by those whose lived experiences are centred within this space. So, while Susan claims that the practicum experience has caused her to become more aware of her class, what she doesn't recognise is the taken-for-granted beliefs about her own status. She feels free to judge her students' experiences/family/community as 'lacking' in comparison to hers. On the basis of these reflections, we have to ask whether we have managed to 'trouble' Susan's assumptions at all.

Similarly, when speaking about the 'poor' manners of the students at Market Secondary

college Susan's judgments are based on her own classed position, something she appears to be unaware of. Such uninterrogated assumptions are illustrated when she writes in her journal:

...good manners means that you're a better person. I don't know, as a child you were brought up believing that these are the things to do.

Her use of the universal 'you' suggests that she believes 'all children' do – or should, learn the same manners - importantly, manners are a measure of morality.

Later in her journal, Susan also commented on her 'shock' and 'surprise' at the manner in which the students interacted with her and each other. However, this later journal entry also suggests to us that she has become less judgmental and more insightful about how her values have been shaped by her middle-class positioning. She writes:

Another area that I am troubled by is the way students can swear or enter classrooms without knocking. I think my reaction is due to my schooling and home life. Somehow, my mother's voice has never entered my thoughts so frequently within one day. This type of environment is one that I will have to adapt to regardless of my instinctive reactions.

Here, Susan seems to suggest that she is beginning to understand that there are other, valid ways of being in the world, that class is not a moral stance and that as a professional she will need adapt to the different ways that students may perform their classed identities. Her final sentence however, suggests that she doesn't yet see class as a socio-cultural construct, still viewing her reactions to the environment as innate.

Interestingly, Helen, whose life experiences seem to us to be more diverse than Susan's, commented that she had had little difficulty establishing relations which students at Market Secondary College, because, as she says:

I tried to just accept what was going on and accept what they were doing, rather than imposing any standards of what I thought they should be doing, or what I think. Susan had a lot of trouble with things because she thought that they should be calling her Miss, and they should stop talking and things. I didn't have any of those preconceptions.

Perhaps Helen is more aware of socio-economic class differences because of her own experiences. Growing up in a "respectable" migrant family with middle-class aspirations, living in a poverty stricken neighbourhood as a single mother, attending university with middle-class colleagues, she appears to more clearly understand the fluidity of the category. For Helen, class is not equated with a particular moral stance as it appears to be for Susan—and indeed, for Kylie as well who felt able to judge those on government pensions as morally reprehensible. Helen appears to us to accept the context and the class status of the students that she worked with without imposing or judging them on the basis of her belief system.

Discussion

In thinking about the project and our aim to ‘trouble’ our students’ understandings of ethnicity and class as socio-economic constructs, we wondered just who we have managed to ‘unsettle’. Did we disrupt their taken-for-granted beliefs about the ‘norm’? (How) did we dis/place their sense of centrality? Did we enable them to think differently about difference?

Sally, we suggest, was able to recognise that getting to know about her students culturally would make her a better teacher. She sees herself up as the one who needs to find out about the ‘other’ or the ‘unknown’ in order to understand their learning needs and difficulties. In this way she appears to recognise the significance of ‘culture’, while retaining her position within the center. In her need-to-know she seems to construct culture as something of a problem that must be overcome if she is able to ‘help’ these students.

In contrast, Kylie with the best of egalitarian intentions, at the beginning and the end of the project still asserted that ‘everyone is the same’. Therefore, ethnicity is best ignored. What would it take to move Kylie to a deeper understanding of cultural difference as a positive?

However, in terms socio-economic class, we felt that Kylie, because of her interactions with Helen gained insight. Helen was able to challenge Kylie’s taken-for-granted beliefs and present another interpretation to her of people on welfare. If nothing else, we felt that Kylie would be less hasty next time in expressing publicly her own value judgments.

Susan’s comments about always being positioned as an outsider also served as a catalyst for much discussion and journal reflections on the part of other participants. The focus group discussion provided a forum for Susan to express her frustration. However, being positioned by her students as an outsider, Susan found most troubling. This caused her to reflect on how she might work with her own students to challenge their taken-for-granted assumptions about what a ‘real’ Australian looks like. Here, Susan is asking the same sort of questions of her students (and herself) as we are asking through this project. Struggle takes place on many different levels.

Some troubling of Susan’s sense of class is also evident in her journal entries. There is still some indication that she is beginning to realise that she will need to become more flexible and accepting of others and how they present themselves.

We feel some satisfaction in reflecting on these small but significant shifts. The teacher education students have begun to understand how ethnicity and class are complex and fluid identity markers. We have also learned how powerful the research context can be as a site of teaching. By bringing together interested students in a safe supportive environment they are able to publicly own and reflect on their values and beliefs and in doing so teach their colleagues including us as researchers, about difference. Engaging in

such pedagogies opens up possibilities for discussion that can be personally risky for our students. Once again we are reminded of the need to establish teaching environments where students feel safe enough and trusting enough to speak about these very complex, troubling and deeply challenging notions of identity.

Finally, through this project, we as researchers have learned again of the importance of continually interrogating our own assumptions and the often 'too-quick' readings that we do of our students' class and cultural identities.

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