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Exploring the Career Experiences of Indigenous Teachers: Beyond Policy and Resource Initiatives.

Ninetta Santoro, Deakin University
Jo-Anne Reid, Charles Sturt University
Lee Simpson, Deakin University
Cathryn McConaghy, University of New England

Abstract

In this paper we provide a contextualising account of a new four-year ARC study, *Indigenous Teachers: Understanding their Professional Pathways and Career Experiences*. The project has grown from our concerns about the low numbers of Indigenous teachers in schools and questions about why it is that of the few Indigenous teacher education students who graduate, many resign from teaching after short periods of time or never take up teaching positions at all.

We believe that one of the reasons for the under representation of Indigenous teachers is due to what we are calling the ‘impenetrability’ of the dominant white culture of schooling, a racial imaginary that portrays the ‘naturalness’ of whiteness. Such an imaginary informs the everyday practices and relations of social power of Australian schooling from curriculum policy to the organisation of the school sports. Our research project is concerned, in part with making visible the discourses of whiteness that shape the experiences and career pathways of Indigenous teachers. In this paper we draw on excerpts of data from interviews with Indigenous teachers in order to begin to understand how discourses of whiteness have shaped their teaching and professional experiences.

Introduction

In this paper we provide a contextualising account of a new four-year ARC study, *Indigenous Teachers: Understanding their Professional Pathways and Career Experiences* and discuss a key issue informing the study, that is, the whiteness of Australian schools. Our study aims to understand the career experiences of former and current Indigenous educators and the experience of beginning Indigenous teachers during the first four years of their careers in NSW and Victorian schools. The project has grown from our concerns about the low numbers of Indigenous teachers in schools and questions about why it is that of the few Indigenous teacher education students with whom we have worked, many have not taken up teaching positions after graduating. We hope that this research will enable us to explore the discourses that shape Indigenous teachers’ experiences and career pathways and to better understand why, despite several national and state reports and initiatives since 1980 (Hughes and Willmot 1982; Queensland Dept. of Education 1992; NATSIEP 1993; Collins 2000; Western Australian Dept. of Education 2002), Indigenous teachers are still significantly under represented in the Australian teacher population. More than twenty years ago Hughes estimated that in order to achieve a ratio of Indigenous teachers to students comparable to that for the non-Indigenous population, there ought to have been ‘1000 Indigenous teachers by 1990’ (Hughes and Willmot 1982). While no accurate and current figures are available, it would appear that in the year 2004, the numbers are still nowhere close to this figure. Indeed, the Ramsey Review (2000) of teacher education in New South Wales identified only 32 Indigenous teachers in NSW schools (representing a population of more than 70,000 Indigenous people in the State).

The under representation of Indigenous teachers in the teaching population is problematic on a number of important levels, including the fact that Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in Australia have had little access to Indigenous teachers. Firstly, it has long been recognised by governments, educators and researchers that Indigenous Australian students remain the most educationally disadvantaged in the country. Such disadvantage is reflected in a number of key markers such as literacy outcomes, (Commonwealth of Australia 2002) school retention and the completion of tertiary education (Collins 2000), indicators that are all well below those of non-Indigenous students. This situation is now recognised as one of the major issues facing the Australian education system (DETYA 1999, Collins 2000). There has been general acknowledgement, as there has been in New Zealand and Canada, that a key to expanding the educational opportunities of Indigenous students in Australia is to increase the number of Indigenous teachers in schools (for example, Collins 2000). This would ensure that Indigenous students have access to teachers who understand their language, culture and learning needs. Secondly, as well as making important contributions to the education of Indigenous students, Indigenous teachers have the potential to make a vital contribution to the education of *all* students, especially in regard to the teaching of Indigenous Studies, a mandated aspect of primary curriculum in both NSW and Victoria and believed to have the potential to contribute to reconciliation between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Australians (Burney 1996, Burrige 1999). However, because there are few Indigenous teachers in Australian schools, there are limited opportunities for non-Indigenous students to develop understandings of Indigenous issues and cultural practices through the teaching and perspective of Indigenous teachers.

Clearly, the issues of supporting and retaining Indigenous teachers in Australia are more complex than can be solved through resourcing or policy support. Unlike Canada and New Zealand, strategies in Australia to attract indigenous students into teaching have been extraordinarily unsuccessful and several decades of support for universities and teacher education program initiatives have made little difference to teacher numbers in schools. Simply attracting greater numbers of Indigenous people into teacher education will not necessarily provide a long-term solution to their under representation, *unless* they remain in the profession. Of the few Indigenous teachers who do graduate from teacher education courses, many resign from teaching after short periods of time or do not take up teaching positions. Our preliminary analysis suggests that there are several reasons offered by Indigenous teachers for their leaving the professions. These include financial difficulties, the stress of relocation and reduced contact with families as well as better salaries and working conditions in other areas. While we recognise that some Indigenous teachers seek, or are offered advisory, educational policy and management positions, we believe such moves away from teaching are often due to what we are calling the 'impenetrability' of the dominant white culture of schooling, a culture that presents barriers to Indigenous teachers both on a cultural and structural level.

Methodology

In order understand the discourses of whiteness that shape schooling, we have planned to research the career pathways of Indigenous teachers in three key areas. First, we see that there is a need for detailed firsthand accounts of the experience of Indigenous teachers. We will interview men and women in NSW and Victoria who have studied and entered the teaching profession – and who have either have remained in classrooms, left teaching to take on administrative, teacher education or other roles in schools or systems, or who have left the field of education entirely. These people will be selected from networks of Indigenous teachers to which our Indigenous co-researchers and our reference group, the NSW AECG, are connected. While many of these participants will be located in established communities such as Riverina towns, others are more 'isolated' within larger regional and metropolitan areas. Interviews will be conducted by individual members of the research team and after transcription, returned for member checking and verification. The entire research team will collectively analyse this corpus of data, both from a thematic and discourse analytic perspective in order to highlight and work with the complexities of teachers' lived experiences and representations of self. The interviews we draw on in this paper, are part of the corpus of data collected at this stage of the project.

Second, we believe that if Indigenous teachers entering the profession are to be supported and nurtured, we need to have a clearer sense of their histories, location, training, expectations and ambitions. To achieve this goal we will be seeking to determine the numbers of Indigenous student teachers currently enrolled in teacher education programs in Universities located in NSW. This information will allow us to track the progress towards and after graduation of these students over the four-year period of the study.

All NSW universities have been contacted and invited to pass on to their final year Indigenous students, information about the study. It is clear there are few such students in teacher education at the present time and we will need to extend the search for volunteers into 2005, again using networks and enlisting the support of education departments. Analysis of this participation data will inform the recruitment of people for the longitudinal study.

Third, we aim to find ways of improving in-school support for Indigenous teachers by following six teacher education graduates through their first three years after graduation. Their involvement in the project as a long-term feature of their induction into teaching will hopefully provide an additional means of support and mentoring for them at a crucial point in their careers. The teachers will meet each year as a group and be interviewed by members of the research team as a group and individually with regular telephone/email contact in between.

Three of the researchers in the project are white, and privileged. Our research partners, Lee, Laurie and Barbara, are Indigenous teachers, who have lived their professional lives quite differently from us. They have not been able to ignore the whiteness of Australian schools, teachers and curriculum. And like many of their Indigenous teaching colleagues, they have entered (and in two cases left) the profession "accidentally" as part of successful careers that nonetheless have been constrained by the 'impenetrability' of the dominant white culture of schooling, and the lack of potential for genuine reform.

Whiteness and Australian Schooling

Being white in Australia is still taken for granted as normal and natural (Burney 1996, McConaghy 2000, Austin and McMaster 1998, Hage 1998). Few non-Indigenous Australians recognise whiteness as a marked category, understanding it as "simply the norm: it is for others to label themselves as other than that norm" (Pearce 2003, p.274).

According to Bonnett:

Ideas about 'race' in the West are inextricably bound up with the history of colonialism. Since the earliest imperialist expeditions Western Europeans and their descendants have become accustomed to being the viewer and the judge of all they encountered. Whiteness is something that defines the 'other' but is not itself subject to others' definitions" (2000 in Pearce 2003, p.274).

A racial imaginary that portrays the 'naturalness' of whiteness informs the everyday practices and relations of social power of Australian schooling. This has taken place and continues to take place despite policies of multiculturalism and several decades of policy objectives to pluralise Australian education (McConaghy 2000). Whiteness is produced through institutional processes and produces and reproduces privilege, advantage and power (Fine 1997). It informs school curriculum, pedagogy, professional relationships, membership of the school council, assessment policies, the school motto and so on. "'Whiteness' is an everchanging, composite, cultural historical construct" (Hage 1998 p.58) that has inextricable connections to colonial Australia. As an Indigenous ex-teacher, Burney reminds us of the need to realise how the White Australia Policy has been built into the foundations of the educational institutions in which almost all of Australia's present generations of educational leaders were schooled. Australia was still 'White Australia' until 1972. According to Burney, this means that "practically everyone now in a position of power or influence or authority that grew up in Australia also grew up in White Australia and grew up with all the attitudes and values that White Australia stood for. That includes most teachers" (Burney 1998 pp. 57-58).

While researchers in North America and Britain have been concerned for some time about whiteness (Carrington et al 2000, Pearce 2003, Fine 1997, Frankenberg 1993, Jones et al 1997), research about whiteness has only recently been taken up in an Australian context. Our previous work which explored the experiences of teachers of ethnic difference in Australian schools (Santoro 1999, 1997, Kamler, Reid and Santoro 1999, Santoro, Kamler and Reid 2001, Santoro, Reid and Kamler 2001) suggest that a dominant 'white' institutional culture in Australia excludes and alienates teachers who are not members of the dominant Anglo-Australian majority. Minority group teachers struggle to cope with racist attitudes of colleagues, students and parents obscured within complex structures of organizational decision-making.

While there are few published accounts of Indigenous teachers' experiences in Australian schools, anecdotal evidence suggests this is no less true for Indigenous teachers.

In what follows, we draw on excerpts of data from interviews with four of the seventeen Indigenous teachers interviewed thus far in order to begin to make visible the discourses of whiteness that have shaped their experiences.

Debbie, Gill, Shirley and Cathy are all former teachers. Debbie entered teacher education as a mature-age student, graduating as a primary teacher almost 15 years ago. She left the profession in the mid nineties to take up a series of positions as an education consultant, a university lecturer and more recently, as a senior member in an Indigenous unit within the Public Service. Her first and only teaching position was in a primary school in a provincial Australian town where the vast majority of her students were Anglo-Australian. Cathy began her teacher training immediately after secondary school and taught for a year in a primary school in a provincial town before taking leave to begin a family. She has moved in and out of teaching having taught at TAFE, University, community settings and has been a consultant. She currently tutors Indigenous students on a private basis and has a business wholesaling and retailing Indigenous art. Shirley began teaching in the early nineties and has worked in a mixture of rural and city primary schools where she has taught both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. She has had an interrupted teaching career, leaving school teaching on several occasions to take up positions across a broad range of settings including University and Technical and Further Education Colleges and community education centres. She is currently working as a consultant for the Catholic Education office in a rural area. Gill entered teacher education as a mature-age student in the early 90s. She has taught in primary schools, secondary schools, TAFE and university. She is currently employed within the public service in a consultative role and is actively involved on a part time basis, in teaching Indigenous language in a community setting.

Pedagogies of Whiteness

Cathy, Gill, Shirley and Debbie speak in their interviews about how the teaching practices in Australian mainstream classrooms are at odds with what they identify as Indigenous/Aboriginal teaching and learning practices. They construct white teaching practices as restrictive, controlled and focusing on 'academic' achievement/knowledge as more valuable than practical and experiential learning. Cathy says:

I think the way the Koori people learn is, you know it's about touching and feeling and exploration and seeing the wonder in a puddle, you know. The discovery of dropping a rock in and making the waves and all that sort of stuff. Whereas western teaching and learning is very compartmentalised. It's very boxed and has to fit into *this*. Because if it doesn't, it's not part of *that*. It sits out here, and that's where we [Indigenous people] sit. We sit out here because we don't fit into a box. We're surrounding the box. We're part of the box. We're inside the box. We're all over the box. We're like the air, we're all around you but it's not ... western teachers don't see that.

Debbie claims her teaching styles too, were at odds with "conventional teaching and learning". She says:

Debbie: I just felt that I was different [to the other teachers], I didn't sort of think in the same kinds of ways and didn't view the kids in the same way. And my style of teaching, in reflection, my style of teaching was probably teaching the way in which Aboriginal people teach. Not the way conventional teaching and learning happens. [...] We would do lots of hands on ...and then the complicated stuff of the paper and pen would come after concepts were well and truly understood. By not forcing them to pen and paper too early, it gave them that time to work it out for themselves [...] I would have lots of hands-on kind of stuff in the classroom which my supervisor [senior teacher] didn't like, you know. I would have things that the kids could play with. I'd let them play with all this stuff and so whenever I wanted to use a resource as a teaching tool they had done all the playing with it first. Rather than bring it in and then they would want to play with it while I'm trying to teach. [her supervisor would

say] “But really, you know you shouldn’t let those kids play with that stuff, because you know it’s precious and it costs a lot of money”.

Similarly, Gill also claims that her ways of working were different to what might be regarded as hegemonic discourses of whiteness. In talking about the nature of the relationships she fostered with students she says:

Well can you imagine me in the mainstream? I mean... (giggles) I cuddle my kids, you know, pat my kids on the bottom. You know, little love tap, kiss. You know, I would imagine that I would always get called up to the principal’s office “Gill, come to the principal’s office”. Yeah I’d be always in trouble [...] Non Koori teachers found it very threatening and I wasn’t seen to be very professional by them.

Shirley, when incorporating music and drama into her classes saw the need for her own active participation in the class along *with* her students.

I get up and perform with them. And they [the other teachers] said, “there’s no way we’re going to be doing that”. I said, “well I just think if you want to children to do things you’ve got to be prepared to do them yourself”. [...] “Miss is up there dancing”. You know that sort of thing. One of the other teachers said to me, “you’re setting a precedent. There’s no way we’re going to be doing *that*. We’re not getting up and dancing”.

The pedagogies of whiteness that dominate mainstream classrooms may well marginalise and ‘other’ those teachers, who because of their raced and cultural backgrounds, may privilege different knowledges and understand teaching and learning in different ways. The teachers from whom this data was collected saw the differences between their ways of working and those valued by the mainstream as a source of stress and frustration. These preliminary findings suggest to us the need to interrogate taken-for-granted assumptions about curriculum, practice and classroom interactions.

White Racism

In what follows we provide extracts from Debbie’s interview to show how she has experienced racism as a teaching professional. We are not suggesting that the following example represents the overt racism experienced by all Indigenous teachers. Since the impact of racial vilification legislation, such racism is less often overt and more often obscured. However, in some ways - it is more difficult to identify and confront. In fact, our interviewees report to us much more subtle racist discourses where colleagues and/or parents ‘joke’ about Indigenous issues, subtly question the nature of their qualifications, or refuse to engage with or incorporate Indigenous perspective in their teaching. However, we offer this sample of interview data to highlight the racial hierarchies than can exist in Australian schools.

Debbie’s recount of her experiences as the only Indigenous teacher in a NSW provincial city primary school is characterised by memories of alienation and marginalisation. One of the major challenges for her was establishing her professional credibility. In the following, Debbie comments about the barriers she faced as a newly appointed teacher.

The Deputy Principal openly declared “I don’t want you at this school and the only reason you’re here, is because the principal wants you here”. That was my introduction to the school. For three days, I just wandered the school. She didn’t introduce me to anyone, she didn’t allocate me any duties or tasks or anything. And she really did resent me being at the school. It was really very difficult. [...] She lobbied parents and told them “if you don’t want an aboriginal person teaching your child, you need to tell the principal”. .. At the end of my first year of teaching, one of the parents came up to me and said “Debbie you’re not a bad teacher!” and I thought, why didn’t she just say, “Debbie, you’re a good teacher”. She [went on to say] “The reason I’m saying this is we were told, if we didn’t want an aboriginal person teaching our children, we needed

to let the principal know”.... I knew that we Indigenous teachers had to be better than good in order to be accepted as average.

Debbie talks about the personal effects of what can only be described as a racist campaign of bullying:

It did take its toll. I had to take some time off because it got to the stage when I'd drive into the school, I'd start to shake and shudder. And water used to drip out of my eyes. I wasn't crying, but it just became too much to cope with and sometimes, I'd have to sit in the car and regroup and regather before I could get out of the car and walk into the classroom.

Finally Debbie resigned, “accidentally moved out of teaching” as she puts it, to make a career move and to “advance” herself. However, Debbie still sees her teaching career as the fulfilment of a childhood ambition “a secret that I had and never told anyone about” and an “obsession”, something that “drives everything you do”.

Concluding Comments

Rather than ‘researching Indigeneity’ as a key to understanding the under representation of Indigenous teachers in Australian schools, as has been a common approach to Indigenous education research for many decades, one of our tasks over the next four years is to explore the discourses of whiteness that shape schooling. We aim to analyse the complex ways in which racial hierarchies are formed and sustained in schools, from the staff room to the play ground, through education policy, curriculum and teaching practices. We hope to build on accounts of Indigenous teachers’ strategies for dealing with these discursive environments so that we might be able to learn from them and ultimately find ways of disrupting the discourses of whiteness that are becoming apparent to us, even within these early stages of our project.

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