

Cultural Reflection in Teacher Education

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Australian education, in spite of a policy of multiculturalism, is struggling to meet the needs of Polynesian students who represent a growing minority group entering the Australian school system. Australian schools and teachers have found it difficult to respond to the specific cultural orientation and learning needs of Polynesian Australian students. Polynesian young people represent a significant proportion of students exhibiting low achievement, disengagement and alienation.

To address these issues, this paper outlines teacher education innovations at the University of Sydney, Faculty of Education and Social Work, in preparing pre-service teachers for working with Polynesian Australian students and their communities. The paper will outline developments in teacher education curriculum and models of school-community-university partnership, for professional development of teachers working with Polynesian Australian students in Australian classrooms. The paper will also present research on the development of critical cultural reflection in teacher education students within the Master of Teaching at the University of Sydney.

"the classroom is important only as it is understood in its relation to the society and culture of the children who occupy it, and teaching will be effective, only as it is related to society and culture." Redfield 1973

LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS FOR CULTURAL IMAGINATION IN TEACHER EDUCATION

For the last 50 years, Australia has been a country of significant inwards migration. Education systems in each of the Australian states has struggled with an appropriate policy response to the diversity that different cultural groups presented to a school system that had been conceived and organised on a middle-class, Anglo-cultural model of schooling. The emergence of multiculturalism as a positive value that should be encompassed in all the practices of schools requires teachers who are able to step outside their own ethnic orientation, and recognise the way in which cultural understanding imbues the teaching-learning process.

The culture gap has been described by Thaman (2003) as the cultural distance between the culture of the classroom and the home. It refers to the processes of exclusion of the culture and non-school lives of students from what happens in school. Secondary teachers see the schooling process as one of teaching their subject and maximising the academic outcomes of their students. Outcomes are demonstrated through assessment processes that bear no relationship to the cultural context of the young people who are their students.

Teachers' practices shaped by unquestioning of hegemonic cultural perspectives, will provide explanations for school failure by students from diverse cultural backgrounds in terms of intrinsic deficiencies, of the individual, the cultural group or in terms of the failings of the family from which the student comes. These explanations reflect a deficit view of the contribution of cultural diversity to students' learning (Connell 1993; Sturman 1997). Such a view is characterised by:

- "Cultural differences are problems rather than resources for learning.
- Pupil performance is the result of the two primary factors of pupil psychology and family socialization.
- Cultural background is largely determinant of school achievement and future socioeconomic standing." (Florio-Ruane 2001).

Schwarzer's research (1999) into student teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning during their in-school practice confirms this deficit model in beginning teachers. What is needed in teacher education are experiences which enable teachers to de-construct their taken for granted understandings of schools and cultural diversity. Shifting educational practice so teachers are able to work in cooperation and with their school communities, towards social justice, presents a challenge to teacher education.

"Cross-cultural experience should unsettle and transform us. Sometimes the process involves loss, sometimes it yields change; it invariably involves risk and requires engagement" (Florio-Ruane 2001). Teacher educators have attempted to develop curricula and experiences that are aimed at disrupting teachers' taken for granted cultural assumptions. McIntyre (2002) writes of disrupting the "dysconscious racism" of American teachers through a process of "unlearning whiteness", "where teacher perspective's about teaching and multicultural education are challenged to go beyond the economy of the stereotype." (McIntyre 2002).

This paper reports on a teacher education course that has forged links with communities, schools, community leaders, teacher educators, students and pre-service teachers. The program operates with an awareness of the necessity to create in teachers the skills to exercise a critical "cultural imagination" (Florio-Ruane 2001). The focus has been on creating the links with neighbourhood and community to develop in the student teachers critically reflective practices, to connect Polynesian Australian students with their future teachers. This connection has been forged in a context that values and supports the students' culture through the development of the cultural imagination of

their future teachers. This course has been offered in the Master of Teaching, a case based post-graduate teacher education course established in 1996 in the Faculty of Education at the University of Sydney (Foster & Horsley 1999; Hunter & Hatton 1998).

The necessity to support pre-service professional learners to explore the cultural hegemony that underlies such views and practices and to understand the consequent alienation and disadvantage that school students experience has been addressed in this teacher education program.

CULTURAL IMAGINATION AND DIMENSIONS IN TEACHING STANDARDS

Currently, in teaching, there is a worldwide standards movement leading to the development of new accountability procedures and standards to assess teacher quality and performance. A national and international mapping of these developing teaching standards reveals a significant role for standards relating to culturally inclusive pedagogy, practices, and understandings. Thus the Newly Qualified Teaching Standards (NQTs) from England specifies that *teachers must take into account ethnic and cultural diversity to enrich the curriculum and raise achievement* (Standard E). (Ramsey 2000) Many other teaching standards incorporate similar statements. In Australia, a number of emerging teaching standards include specifications for cultural understandings and behaviours. The Standards of Professional Practice for Accomplished Teaching in Australian Classrooms, a current standards framework from the Australian College of Education (Brock 1999) is an Australian benchmark set of standards typical of developments in this area. This framework is currently used to identify outstanding teachers in Australian schools. It suggests that *'teachers must treat all students honestly, justly and equitably by recognizing and appreciating the range of values held by individuals as well as within families, groups, cultures and the wider school.'* The standards go on to suggest that *'teachers should be reflective practitioners critiquing the impact of teaching and professional values on students, colleagues and others in the wider learning community.'* As well these standards argue *'that teachers should take due account of the educational implications of the community's cultural diversity ...by being sensitive and responsive to the educational issues generated by and within the context of continuing to develop a socially cohesive Australian society.'* (Brock 1999)

For teacher educators, it is less clear how to develop or implement curriculum to achieve the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to achieve these outcomes and standards. In New Zealand, Maori, Pacific Island and some Pakeha teachers with bicultural experiences are more likely to develop the more holistic approaches, the imparting of knowledge in several subjects at once, the stress on interconnections and learning by exposure and context and the encouragement of cooperative learning and subordination of individual to group achievement that Thaman (1992) describes as *'the basis of culturally appropriate pedagogy for South Pacific Islanders'*.

The sort of cultural literacies, implied by the standards noted above, have been described by Thaman (1988) as requiring understandings that *'recognise the dynamics of*

culture, accommodation of change, create space for differences and most importantly ensures meaningful and successful participation in one's community'. This view of *cultural literacy* emphasises the importance of cultural identity in the education process and requires teachers to understand the tensions between the students home culture and school.

In this view education requires the development of awarenesses and practices that legitimise Polynesian identity and culture in the context of Australian society. For pre-service teacher education students, this means coming to see another culture positively, and viewing it from the lens of possibility, as a source of new learning. (in the words of a student teacher 'this is another whole world that I know nothing about'). As a result of reflection on this new cultural learning, teacher education students begin to adjust their teaching practice to take account of their new cultural knowledge. In this way their teaching is informed by a cultural imagination.

Such imagination or dimension is only derived from serious engagement with another cultural group. Serious engagement requires considerable interaction with the community, in this case provided by visits to homes, churches and community, and long term connections with families and students *outside the school*. Through activities in homework centres, student forums and discussions in community contexts, work with parents and community groups, pre-service teachers come to learn about other cultures in depth and explore the links between culture, behaviour and learning in its cultural and social context.

The New South Wales Government Review of Teacher Education in New South Wales (Ramsey 2000) found that *"more needs to be done to increase the ethnic diversity of the teaching profession. The profession can be best enriched by its composition reflecting as fully as possible that of the society its serves.....in some schools people from particular backgrounds should be better represented, where their knowledge and skills would make a significant contribution to improving the quality of the teaching and learning environment, and broadening student aspirations."*

Many teacher education programs have developed a range of rural and overseas practicums (Hill, Thomas & Cote 1996) and internships to provide a method or vehicle to immerse students in another culture and enhance their cultural understandings. It is believed that these experiences allowed pre-service teacher educators to develop enriched teaching and learning insights. However, the characteristics of the teaching force mitigate against easily achieving the outcomes identified for multicultural education by the current standards movement.

The paper will discuss issues in Polynesian Australian education that lead to the development of this unique teacher education curriculum. The paper will then report on research conducted on pre-service students evaluation of their cultural learning from the course and their ability to undertake culturally critical reflection.

Overall the paper will focus on the connections between school, student and community culture and teacher education, and conceptualisations of culturally sensitive pedagogy in teacher education.

POLYNESIAN AUSTRALIAN MIGRATION AND POLYNESIAN AUSTRALIAN YOUTH'S EXPERIENCE OF SCHOOLS

In 2002, only a few teachers of Polynesian cultural background were employed by the Government school system in New South Wales. However, Polynesian Australians of Samoan, Tongan, Cook Island and Fijian heritage were a growing and identifiable cultural group in New South Wales Schools. In certain parts of Sydney this group is the fastest growing minority cultural group. Already in a number of the school districts in the South Western and Western parts of Sydney, Samoan and Tongan are the dominant non english speaking background languages (NESB). In some school districts secondary schools and their associated feeder schools Tongan enrolments have increased by 62% between 1994 and 2000 and Samoan enrolments have grown by over 97% for the same period. Enrolments in the secondary schools of the Penrith, Blacktown and Mt Druitt school districts have increased representation for students of Tongan, Samoan and Fijian origin. (Carauana 2001)

The fast growth of these communities has been relatively unanticipated. According to Vao (2002) Samoan migration to Australia generally began in a substantial way only within the last 15 years. Although Tongan and Fijian migration began earlier, large scale immigration from these communities has only been a recent phenomena. The majority Tonga, Samoan and Fijian migrants usually arrive after an extended residence in New Zealand. Many are bicultural with extended experience in the New Zealand school system. Anecdotal evidence suggests that newer migrants are increasingly arriving from the homeland under the family reunion categories of the Australian immigration system.

In a study of Samoan immigrants Vao concluded that

- Migrants place great emphasis on maintaining their Samoan way of life (*fa'a-Samoa*) and assert that Samoan culture is faithfully maintained in Australia.
- Samoans form a tight-knit group with central features of membership ties, extensive gift-giving in the form of remittances to dependants in Samoa and extensive participation in social networks that ritually observe life-cycle events (*fa'alavelav*)
- In the area of the family, there are conflicts between parents and children over discipline and the degree of parental control over children's lives.
- Villages and parents fear the loss of control over their children. Many first-generation migrants feel that some of their values and relationships have been turned upside down.

Quantitative and qualitative data on school performances and participation indicates areas of concern for Polynesian Australian students. These groups are over represented in suspensions, expulsions and discontinuance compared to other identifiable cultural groups (Hutakau 1999). Polynesian Australian students tend to make up a considerable

proportion of students scoring in the bottom decile in the Higher School Certificate and quintile in the School Certificate and in the basic skills tests and English Literacy and Language Assessment tests that report on the performance of students in New South Wales Schools. Furthermore these indicators of failure and under achievement are highly visible for both students, parents and communities.

One aspect of Polynesian Australian education causing particular concern is the low retention (staying on) rate of these groups in senior high school and higher education (Lowe et al. 1997). Research undertaken on Cook Island students retention concluded (Lowe et al. 1997) that many Cook Island students linked their feelings about specific subjects to the attitude of the teacher. The research identified three categories of schooling difficulties mentioned by including methods of teaching, literacy and racism. Students offered suggestions for overcoming the difficulties and most of their suggestions included improving the communication channels between students and teachers such as *'Teachers should relax.'* *'Seniors need more freedom.'* *'Teachers should talk to us more.'* *'We need more direction.'* Not surprisingly, the research showed that teachers had little knowledge of the student home culture and most could not actively distinguished between Cook Island students and Pacific Island students in general. *'There was a general culture of seeing Pacific Island students as a group, unless there had been some necessity to seek out a particular student's background.'* Teachers felt that Pacific Islanders generally were low-achievers in the school, *"Islander kids seem to experience the problems of being late, lack of attendance and truancy. They often do not have the equipment and are not prepared for class. Islanders may lose their belongings, textbooks, bags. Because of their cultural influence and communal lifestyle everything is shared"*.

Research on Maori students in New Zealand (Bishop et al. 2002) has similarly noted that Maori students recognise that the quality of classroom relationships and the use of culturally appropriate pedagogy as vital factors in Maori student engagement at school.

Prestidge (2002, p.6) sums up the qualities that effective teachers will exhibit. Bishop (2002) has similarly identified the following teacher behaviours:

- establish a sound, social, caring, respectful relationship with the students and their families;
- Monitor and check students understand what is expected of them;
- Acknowledge and value their prior learning;
- Provide feedback and feedforward in relation to academic learning and behaviour;
- Construct the learning process, style, content in cooperation with students.

These qualities have been introduced and practiced by the student teachers participating in the course *Paradise or Problem*.

PARADISE OR PROBLEM: TEACHER EDUCATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

In response to the growing understandings of the needs of Polynesian Australians, the Faculty of Education at Sydney University began to develop specific programs in teacher education to prepare new teachers to work with Polynesian Australians. The phenomena of an increasing body of disengaged young people participating in an education system in which teachers had little knowledge and valuing of the cultural context of these students presented a challenge to the developers of the new Master of Teaching course at the University of Sydney.

Since 1996, sixteen courses have been mounted and some 250 pre-service teachers have participated and developed skills to assist the growing number of Polynesian Australian students in the NSW education system. The Paradise or Problem course has been developed to provide pre-service students with

- The opportunity to focus on the cultures of Pacific Island students
- Intercultural understanding and practice through interaction with students and their families in the context of home and community
- Active input from leaders in the islander community
- The opportunity to work with Islander students in non-school contexts by providing educational support in an after school studies centre
- Practicum experiences in schools with large islander populations
- The opportunity for internships in country of origin of some of the islander groups

A key feature of the teaching and learning focus of the course has been connecting with individual islander students and their families, and providing opportunities to make links with those whose cultural experiences are very different from those of the pre-service beginning teachers. The development of the course has been dependent on the participation of the islander communities. Community leaders have played a crucial role in course design and implementation both in terms of advice and in opening channels of communication and connection. Subsequently pre-service and in service teachers have had the opportunity to take part in community advisory meetings, manage student conferences, attend community church and cultural meetings and further develop the links between schooling and the community.

This pre-service model has also been extended to in-service professional development for teachers working in schools with significant numbers of Polynesian Australian students. The need to understand the communities and to respond appropriately has been the motivation for these teachers.

The *Paradise or Problem* course has featured a number of interlocking and inter-related components

- Cultural and education learnings at university, through lectures and seminars,
- Provision of a South Pacific Island Homework and Study Centre for Polynesian Australian students and their parents, managed and operated by pre-service teachers,
- A Tertiary Awareness Program for Polynesian Australians managed by pre-service students
- Interaction with the community through access to community events and meetings
- The opportunity to undertake practicum in schools with Polynesian Australian students and the opportunity to undertake teaching internships in Polynesian nations

RESEARCH ON THE CRITICAL CULTURAL REFLECTION OF PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS UNDERTAKING THE PROGRAM

Developing critically reflective practitioners is one of the main aims of teacher education programs. Reflective practitioners develop skills in critiquing their pedagogy during and after their teaching (Smith & Hatton 1995) and evaluating their teaching practices with a view to improvement. Furthermore *'to engage in critical reflection requires a moving beyond the acquisition of new knowledge and understanding, into questioning [of] existing assumptions, values, and perspectives'* (Cranton 1996). Becoming culturally critically reflective is an exercise in critical reflection where cultural assumptions, values and perspectives are critiqued, compared and evaluated.

Developing cultural critical reflection requires a number of reflective elements and processes that are held to be central to critical reflection (Imel 1998). These include

- being aware of the cultural contexts of schooling and learning,
- critiquing teaching and learning situations from diverse cultural reference points,
- analysing the cultural assumptions held in given teaching situations,
- reviewing one's own cultural assumptions by being questioning and skeptical
- speculating on more culturally appropriate and sensitive teaching and learning behaviours (Brookfield 1988).

Although it is widely understood that existing school and organisation structure inhibit reflection, the capacity for teachers to change, improve their teaching and develop new teaching roles is dependent on critical and reflective examination of teaching practices. Cultural critical reflection requires teachers to look beyond their learned individual, institutional, educational and social practices and to interrogate them from the perspectives of other cultures. Some researchers have termed this process 'unlearning or

unmaking whiteness (McIntyre 2002), where teachers' perspectives about teaching and multicultural education are challenged to go beyond the 'economy of the stereotype' (McIntyre, 2002).

By the end of the teacher education course pre-service teachers had:

- tutored and coached in the home study centres where they the opportunity to interact with the children's parents,
- participated in community events and interacted widely with community members
- conducted tertiary awareness days for Polynesian Australian students and community members at the University
- been exposed to Polynesian community leaders and speakers during seminars at the University

At the conclusion of the course students were asked to briefly evaluate the course, and reflect on their learning. A small pilot sample of these evaluations and reflections were analysed to identify the type of reflection that pre-service teachers undertaking the course had made.

Researchers at the University of Sydney value critical reflection highly and have developed ways of researching its development (Smith & Hatton 1995). Harris, Smith, Merritt, Simons and Reid (2002) developed ways of analysing students' reflective writing to assess whether students reflective writing was simply descriptive or truly critical. This method of analysing reflective writing has been adapted for describing and analysing *culturally* reflective pre-service student writing to establish how much cultural reflection has been critical *cultural* reflection.

Culturally reflective writing can be conceptualised as representing varying strengths and depths of cultural awareness and questionings, cultural analysis of teaching and learning situations and varying levels of understandings of the implications of the implications of culture for pedagogy and teaching behaviour. Reflection can be descriptive in the sense that it reports experiences or dialogic to the extent that it involves a conversation and discourse about experiences. Educators have long been concerned about critical reflection - where questioning the assumptions and structure of situations leads to new visions and views, which provide both the basis and motivation for changed behaviour.

Culturally descriptive reflection described writing that referred to pre-service students learning of new cultural practices, ideas, terms and people that they experienced in the course. In particular culturally reflective writing included Polynesian language and expressions that describe important aspects of Polynesian cultural practices and beliefs, and descriptions of the Polynesian students and community that they met during the course. Such culturally descriptive writing showed pre-service teachers growing awareness of culture and its role in learning. Such culturally descriptive reflection provides the starting point for analysing the cultural assumptions in teaching and learning situations.

Culturally dialogic reflection described writing that involved the pre-service students in analytic conversations with themselves and their culture, and their cultural practices. In particular, culturally dialogic reflective writing discussed how cultural practices conflict in school settings and the meaning of this for Polynesian Australian students and Australian teachers of Polynesian Australian students. Culturally dialogic reflective writing explored the underlying cultural origin of particular teaching and learning situations and tried to explain their cultural basis.

Culturally critical reflection described writing in which the pre-service teachers examined their own teaching behaviour in the context of the wider social, political and cultural context of Polynesian Australians. In particular, culturally critical reflective writing focused on speculation about appropriate teacher behaviour and pedagogy in the context of reviewing cultural assumptions. Such writing evidenced pre-service teachers theorizing about the best ways to plan, program and organize teaching and learning on the basis of reflecting about new cultural learning they had made.

PRE-SERVICE STUDENTS CULTURAL REFLECTION

The preliminary results of the pilot study revealed that most of the pre-service teachers' reflection was culturally descriptive reflection. Almost 70% of all the reflective writing was of this type. The pre-service teachers reflective writing constantly referred to the cultural items, practices and people they encountered in the course. For two of the respondents this was the only type of reflection undertaken. All the respondents reflective writing included references to vernacular terms such as *Fa'afetai mo fou a'oa'oga*, *tofa soifua*, *fa'a samoa*, which are essential in developing cultural awareness of Polynesian Australians. Culturally descriptive reflection examples of writing included,

The interview with Tongan parents have given me some understanding about Tongan culture both in Tonga and how it has changed in Australia. The parents were very warm and friendly. The reasons that most Tongans came to Australia are to look for jobs and to give their children a better education and life. (3)

I found the talks given by the Tongan lady and the Samoan guy very useful as an insight into understanding Tongan and Samoan life both here in Australia and back home in the village. (2)

Approximately 20% of the reflective writing could be identified as culturally dialogic where the reflective writing attempted to explain educational phenomena from a cultural perspective. This culturally dialogic type of reflective writing shows that the writers are engaged in a dialogue with culture and they develop new ways of explaining events and seeing pedagogic situations. Although usually dialogue implies the use of the personal pronoun (I) cultural dialogue involves reflection which explores the cultural by comparison and attribution that is new. Often the dialogue has an intertextual aspects as the writer seeks new attributions that are referenced in another cultural view. Culturally dialogic reflective examples of writing included

The information I collected about Western Samoa not only provided me with a sound background of what the climate, crops, wealth, politics and village life included, but it also highlighted the hierarchical structure of Samoan villages - who serves who. I hope to use the knowledge gained from my reading as a reference point for story telling and a way to explain ideas clearer either for the parents or the children. (3)

Some of these issues concern the way Tongan children relate to figures in our society. Their status or authority may greatly differ from, oppose and abrade the attitudes expected toward those figures in a Tongan home and community hierarchy. Their expected behaviour in school versus the behaviour expected at home, poses a dual demeanor that inevitably would be confusing and frustrating. The two cultural deliberations on the importance of education, its expectations and priority must further cause anguish for the student. Parents may feel a loss of control and helplessness, reacting profoundly to their child's resistant behaviour. Meanwhile, the school or teachers may have no idea or little intention of constructively tackling these problems. (5)

Only 10% of reflective writing could be classed as culturally critical where the pre-service teachers synthesized their new cultural information and used it to speculate on how they could improve their teaching by more appropriate and culturally sensitive pedagogy. This writing locates behaviour in a cultural frame. Another aspect of culturally critical reflective writing is its affirmation. Such writing not only values another culture it also frames it in the context of empowerment both for the teacher, and their speculative and planned action but also for the target student group. Culturally critical reflective writing examples included

I feel it would be useful to talk at length with parents about their role in supporting their children in further education (or possible careers) enabling them to feel a sense of real collaboration and guidance concerning their children's lives at school and beyond. I think the students would appreciate some advice and discussion on what they could achieve and pursue...we as a group, could endeavour to provide some assistance and support to the parents and students in determining and acting upon any ideas they have for education, training and employment in the future, it may strengthen all of our positions. (5)

Some of the course participants had also taken the opportunity to undertake an extended internship of 10 weeks in the South Pacific Island schools. Since 1996, 25 teacher education students have completed internships in Fiji, Samoa, Tonga and the Cook Islands. Initial evaluation of their internship reports (completed after the completion of the internship as a reflection on the internship process) indicates that living in South Pacific communities and teaching in South Pacific schools for extended periods accelerates the development of culturally reflective writing. Such internship reports features considerable proportions of culturally dialogic reflective writing.

CONCLUSION

The philosopher Kierkegaard suggested that “*All deep thought begins and ends in the attempt to grasp whatever touches one most immediately.*” Deep and serious engagement in another culture and its practitioners is necessary for the development of the cultural imagination, an imagination that is necessary if teachers are to take up the challenges of multicultural education. Serious engagement in other cultures allows pre-service teachers to question their own cultural and educational assumptions. Engagement with communities in non-school educational contexts allows pre-service teachers to develop new cultural lenses that are likely to lead them to affirm other cultures and see the possibilities they afford.

It is well known that critical reflection helps shape a shared discourse in the community of teachers, a discourse that ultimately values and undertakes discussion of teaching strategies and evaluates current teaching practice. Critical reflection is the holy grail of teacher education. To develop teachers that critically reflect on their pedagogy implies teachers who can evaluate and improve their teaching, who put their students at the centre of evidence collected about teaching and learning. This paper has developed the concept of cultural reflection. Critical cultural reflection is necessary to review the cultural assumptions in pedagogy. Culturally critical reflection provides the motivation to adopt pedagogical practices that affirm student identity and culture and overcomes the economy of stereotype.

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