



'More like the kids than the other teachers': One working-class pre-service Teacher's experiences in a middle-class profession



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HIGHLIGHTS

- The voice of working-class teachers is largely missing from educational research.
- Working-class teachers feel pressure to acquire more privileged teacher habitus.
- Critical reflection enables working class teachers value their own experiences.
- Working-class students benefit from teachers who know impact of deficit teaching.

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ABSTRACT

While teaching is largely a White, middle-class profession, some teachers, including White teachers, come from low socio-economic backgrounds. This paper examines how one working-class pre-service teacher in Australia experiences studying in a predominantly middle-class teacher-education program. Drawing on the work of Bourdieu, this paper seeks to explore what we can learn from the reflections of a female pre-service teacher who is a member of this much smaller group of working-class teachers and who brings to her teaching the habitus and life history that aligns with many of her students and the low socio-economic communities in which she teaches.

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1. Introduction

There is growing concern for the educational welfare of students from low socio-economic status (LSES) or disadvantaged backgrounds, which many believe is negatively impacted by school systems and teachers who cannot meet the cultural needs of their diverse student populations (Ball, 2009; Delpit, 2012; Mills, 2013). This paper explores the critical reflections of one working-class pre-service teacher as she examines and reflects upon her own habitus and the complex ways she has had to navigate both her Initial Teacher Education program and her practicum experiences within low socio-economic schools. We believe that Salli's¹ voice, as a working-class woman, is one that is largely absent from the literature. Although her background may not be the norm within

the teaching profession, an underlying rationale for this paper comes from our strong conviction that the experiences of working-class teachers must be made more visible, with voices such as Salli's promoted and heard. This paper presents Salli's thoughts as she builds connections between her school-based experiences (on practicum and teaching in LSES schools) and a variety of theories related to poverty and economic disadvantage (covered within her Initial Teacher Education program at university).

While the 'achievement gap' is commonly discussed in Australia as a way of noting the glaringly different outcomes for students from privileged backgrounds as compared with poorer or more disadvantaged students (Gonski et al., 2011), the divisions of gender, race and social class are commonly perceived as *complications* in education. In a predominantly White, middle-class profession, operating within an equally monocultural system (Delpit, 2012; Sleeter, 2008; Villegas, 2007), such divisions are often forgotten or ignored as significant factors that affect the classroom and a student's place in it. This omission, coming from teachers who take their privileged status for granted, regularly results in

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¹ Salli is a pseudonym.

deficit attitudes (Lazar, 2012). For example, teachers from privileged backgrounds very different from their students' are often reported as perceiving their pupils as incapable, not smart enough or somehow disinterested in learning (Aveling, 2002; Luke et al., 2013). The disengagement of some students and their families comes to be seen as a 'trait', which is dangerously understood as inherent, rather than a product of the broader social constructs that determine what kinds of knowledge are (de)valued in society. Such negative understandings of students from disadvantaged backgrounds are reinforced by professional development programs such as Ruby Payne's US-developed *Framework for Understanding Poverty* (Payne, 2005), which is gaining popularity among principals and teachers, even outside the US. Payne's packages for teachers, which include stereotypes about the many ways poor people are different from middle-class people (Ng & Rury, 2006), has been criticised as damaging because it implies that not doing well academically is "a natural outcome of class-related deficits in their lives both inside and/or outside the school gates" (Hall & Jones, 2013, p. 419). While there are many good reasons to attract more culturally diverse teachers into the school system, teachers are not themselves a panacea for solving inequity. As Berliner (2013) makes clear, a good teacher alone cannot be expected to 'solve' the effects of poverty on children and their families. Nonetheless, deficit thinking is often linked to the fact that teachers and students so often come from different backgrounds.

Both socio-economic status and race are sometimes resisted as factors that impact on educational attainment in schooling (Aveling, 2002), especially at the school and classroom levels, because these are confronting issues for many White, middle-class teachers and admitting their influence acknowledges the inequitable social structures and ideologies that underpin Australian society. Hence, we can observe how socio-economic status is undoubtedly an important factor influencing student achievement and progression in schooling, yet despite this clear correlation, socio-economic status is often missing in the discourse of the everyday functions of schooling and of teachers. Consequently, individual teachers and school systems often function with a kind of colour and socio-economic *blindness*.

In addition to the current funding challenges in Australian schools, inexperienced beginning teachers are disproportionately allocated to schools that serve some of Australia's neediest of students, such as those prioritised by the now abandoned *Review of funding for schooling* (Gonski et al., 2011). This occurs despite the fact that it is widely accepted that well-prepared teachers with good understandings of race, culture and social class should be placed in schools in which they can make a difference. Dunne and Gazeley (2008) draw our attention to the lack of preparation for identifying issues surrounding disadvantage within Initial Teacher Education programs that can result in some beginning teachers walking into, and then promptly walking out of, *challenging* schools. It is clear therefore that retention of staff in these schools is a major problem resulting in a yearly cycle of recruiting new teachers (most of whom are inexperienced graduates).

Given that teachers have continually been shown to have a significant impact upon student performance (Jensen, Hunter, Sonnemann, & Cooper, 2014), we have been drawn to several significant questions: What difference might it make within the LSES context when pre-service teachers themselves come from socio-economic backgrounds similar to their students? How do these pre-service teachers report on their experiences of becoming part of a largely middle-class profession? How do they retain their cultural identity in a field that historically de-values their experiences and where power relations are played out constantly? What effort does it take to *become* a teacher in those conditions?

2. Habitus and pre-service teachers

Habitus encompasses the thoughts, behaviours, skills and forms of conduct that are socially and culturally constructed. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) posit that each of us has inherited and accumulated a *habitus*: a set of socially acquired dispositions, skills and forms of conduct. We read one another's habitus and associate ideas and assumptions about socio-economic backgrounds in the same ways that we perceive racial or ethnic difference. The apparent invisibility of social status within a field (such as a university teacher-education program or a school) encourages a kind of 'class blindness' even though the responses to class are consistent with the ways people respond to more *visible* difference such as race. The overall privileged status of many teachers (McIntosh, 2012) means they are at risk of being unable to see (much less appreciate) social class difference among their students.

According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), habitus is a "system of durable, transposable dispositions" inscribed in people's minds (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 53) that influence worldviews and actions. In the classroom, this could affect everything from how a teacher greets students to how they grade them because habitus is constructed not only from our personal histories, but also from "the entire collective history of family, class, race and ethnicity that the person is a member of" (Shim, 2012, p. 211). In this sense, our perceptions of one another and the occurrences of prejudice or discrimination should not be considered individual choices, but rather, as evidence of a broader social challenge. Understanding how these ideas are embedded through socialisation and how they can unconsciously influence our daily dealings with others requires that teachers engage in critical reflection and develop a conscious awareness of their predispositions, engrained attitudes and assumptions.

All teachers, irrespective of their social or cultural background, enter universities and the workforce with their habitus bound to their own distinct class-constructed values and related ideology (Sommerville & Rennie, 2012; Villegas, 2007). Their values and ideologies are informed by their socio-cultural and familial histories and, hence, because teaching has historically been, and largely continues to be, a White, middle-class occupation, many teachers enter university with markedly similar backgrounds. Typically, Education faculties have sought to prepare teachers whose backgrounds match those of middle-class students. Cochran-Smith et al. (2012) note that "a teacher's individual life experiences and past personal choices profoundly shape how teacher education is interpreted, curriculum is developed, and instruction is enacted in the classroom" (p. 32). Hence, it is unsurprising that the teaching profession constitutes a prime site that reflects the middle-class ideologies that potentially perpetuate the institutional bias entrenched in mass schooling. In short, the school system itself is "seen to play an active role in (re)producing class inequalities in wider society" (Hall & Jones, 2013, p. 417).

The aim here is not to lay blame on teachers or to generalise, but instead, to draw attention to trends in the behaviour of teachers who come from particular backgrounds and to problematise this in light of high-poverty schooling contexts. Thus, teachers' life histories, discourse and attitudes hold the potential to unequally privilege and disadvantage particular students in the classroom and it stands to reason that students from minority backgrounds are at considerable risk of their teachers imposing negative perceptions, stereotyping and bias due to the workings of dominant unconscious (or conscious) bias (Shim, 2012).

3. Teaching as a middle-class profession

There has been substantial research around diversifying teacher

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