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Conceptualising a pedagogical cultural identity through the narrative construction of early career Aboriginal teachers' professional identities

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Concept 'pedagogical cultural identity' emerged in study with Aboriginal teachers.
- They embed their cultural knowledge and lived experiences into their pedagogy.
- They mobilise a pedagogical cultural identity to build relationships with students.
- Contextual power relations influence the enactment of pedagogical cultural identity.
- A pedagogical cultural identity cannot be fixed and or assumed.

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the concept 'pedagogical cultural identity' as one that embeds cultural knowledge and lived experience into pedagogical practice. Four narratives were constructed from fifteen in-depth interviews with early career Aboriginal teachers who completed their Aboriginal Studies teaching degree at the University of Sydney. The study found that these teachers enacted their habitus, harnessed their social and cultural capital, and mobilised their relationship building skills in the construction of their professional identity. Significantly, contextual power relations influenced the enactment of a pedagogical cultural identity, challenging assumptions of a presumed identity claim by exploring its potential and limitations.

1. Introduction

This paper seeks to develop the concept 'pedagogical cultural identity' which emerges from an Australian research study that explored the narrative construction of early career Aboriginal teachers' professional identities. The concept encapsulates the way in which these teachers embed their tacit cultural knowledge, passion, skills and lived experience into their daily teaching practice. In this context, conflating pedagogy, cultural knowledge, lived experience and identity became critical to an understanding of self as cultural being, teacher and learner. While the term 'pedagogical cultural identity' is applied by Hart, Whatman, McLaughlin, and Sharmer-Brymer (2012, p. 720) to the teaching profession as a whole, the concept has traction in this study for describing the importance of developing an individual teaching identity. This identity can be mobilised to build significant relationships with Aboriginal (and often other marginalised) students to improve their educational experiences and outcomes.

van Manen (1990) captures a sense of what a pedagogical cultural identity might look like when he says:

> The ultimate success of teaching actually may rely importantly on the "knowledge" forms that inhere in practical actions, in an embodied thoughtfulness, and in the personal space, mood and relational atmosphere in which teachers find themselves with their students. The curricular thoughtfulness that good teachers learn to display towards children may depend precisely upon

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the internalized values, embodied qualities, thoughtful habits that constitute virtues of teaching (p. 13).

The connections van Manen makes between habitus, curriculum, pedagogic relations and teacher identity are mediated by ways in which the relationships of power operate within the specific contexts that each of these early career teachers work in. This general approach – linking an embodied sense of professional self with an in-situ understanding of local possibilities and resistances – has been useful in framing my approach to questions raised by my sample of Aboriginal teachers.

However, we need to be mindful of the lessons of post-structuralist theory; overly homogenised categories can be misleading if they take us away from the specificity and fluidity of always-enacted relations 'on the ground'. The concept of a pedagogical cultural identity for instance, has the potential to let in exploitation and cultural determinism if it is treated as an assumed and/or fixed identity only attainable by a few 'cultural experts' (who happen here to be Aboriginal). Social life is dense and sometimes contradictory. The contingent and relational processes teachers applied to negotiate their personal, professional and situated identities reveal attempts to navigate the tensions, complexities and synergies at the 'cultural interface' (Nakata, 2007; Yunkaporta, 2009). This study explores the subjects' sense of the possibilities and limitations of being an Aboriginal educator and the relations of power that influence this enactment of a pedagogical cultural identity.

2. Context

In western education systems, school cultures primarily reflect Eurocentric values, beliefs and practices and so the 'Othering' of different knowledges, cultures and peoples often emerges through the hidden curriculum (Apple & King, 1983; Giroux & Penna, 1983; Seddon, 2001). The ways in which knowledges are marginalised or put in a hierarchy can be seen as an aspect of disciplinary power and coercive power structures (Foucault, 1976). Morgan (2004, p. 176) suggests that there are no neutral spaces in education and that schooling can either challenge or reinforce dominant power structures. When enacted as technologies of learning, these power structures can lead to student underachievement and/or social marginalisation. Social justice approaches attempt to address the dichotomy between the educational rhetoric of pluralistic education, and an essentially assimilationist curriculum that Hewitt (2000, p. 112) refers to as " education for domestication". Further, Kostogriz and Peeler (2004, pp. 2–3) note the limited subject positions available to minority teachers within the pedagogical spaces of the Australian education system. This includes the construction of marginality that requires a continual negotiation of the power-knowledge relation. Recognition of this dynamic is crucial to reconstructing these pedagogical spaces so as to create an equitable workplace. The centrality of power relations to all contexts and social practices calls for a re-examination of normative assumptions to construct alternative identities (Cummins, 2009, p. 261).

Context for Aboriginal teachers is complicated by historically and politically produced socio-cultural settings within and beyond the Australian education system. For Aboriginal people, this narrative is typically one of oppression, exclusion, control and tolerance but it is not everyone's experience. Exploring the diversity of Aboriginal lived experience is therefore important in this context (Author, 2012). The contested and often ambiguous space between western and Indigenous knowledge and modes of operation is acknowledged in Nakata's (2002, 2011) cultural interface framework. This conceptual and relational space where Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledges, cultures, values and beliefs intersect (Nakata, 2007), is generally uncertain and often antipathetic. The locale and agency of the learner can be a site of hostility or reconciliation (McGloin, 2009, p. 40) and influence the relationships of power that Aboriginal teachers navigate in their teaching context. The enactment of a pedagogical cultural identity therefore, challenges the legitimacy of an implicit and expected claim to this identity. As such, analysis is crucial to develop authentic and nuanced understandings of this phenomena.

Hart et al. (2012, pp. 717–719) examined how pre-service Aboriginal teachers managed the relationships of power. They found that while their teachers were aware of power relations during their Professional Experience, they were not adequately prepared to negotiate these. This left them feeling undermined by ambiguities and contradictions as they struggled to find validation of their Indigeneity within their emerging pedagogical identity. Many were troubled by questions of racial and cultural authenticity and struggled to develop equitable and just pedagogical relationships (Hart et al., 2012, p. 719) with their supervising teacher. Thus specific socio-cultural context contributes to the enactment (or not) of a pedagogical cultural identity that is agentic and critical to the development of one's professional identity.

Further, context does not only refer to schools or western institutions but wherever learning occurs. This can include off-site cultural locations and activities such as camps, educational, social and cultural immersion experiences, many of which are highly beneficial for Indigenous students and their teachers. Key research here and overseas (see for instance Bishop & Berryman, 2010; Carey & Russell, 2011; Chinn, 2007; Keddie, 2012; Perso, 2012; Tanaka et al., 2007) identifies the value of situating cultural education away from institutional sites into communities, 'on country' and led by Indigenous knowledge holders. Tanaka et al. (2007) describe a culturally located professional learning program for pre-service teachers at the University of Victoria, British Canada on the production of a Thunderbird/Whale protection and welcoming pole. This traditional Indigenous pole-carving course known as Lekwungen and Liekwelthout transformed pre-service teachers ideas about teaching and learning. Through narratives in story and song, which articulated the learning experiences, one participant reflected, "This class taught me how to take charge of my own learning. This class taught me there are many different ways of learning, and some of them hold more meaning than others" (p 107). Similarly, in New Zealand Bishop and Berryman (2010) implemented the Te Kotahitanga kaupapa Maori research and teacher professional learning project in order to improve the educational achievement of Maori students (p. 174). This project begins with an induction program run be elders known as Hui Whakarewa where teachers experience Maori culture in the local Marae. This culturally appropriate setting places Maori culture at the centre and as 'normal' and " opens up ongoing lines of communication between the schools and the elders and parents of the local Maori community" (p. 180). Studies such as these, consistently note that deeper, relationship-driven learning through culturally responsive pedagogical approaches and built around students' cultural identities as well as the cultural identity of the site is significant. Opportunities to experience learning in this way for teachers can be the key in developing a pedagogical cultural identity leading to deeper engagement with students, their families, local community members and local histories and cultures (Author et al., 2012).

3. Methodology

In depth interviewing and narrative methodology were employed in this study to give voice to a historically, culturally and