



Reading summary

Schulz, S. (2018). White governmentality, life history, and the cultural politics of race in remote settings: Situating the teacher/voluntourist. In G. Vass, K. Gulson, J. Maxwell, & S. Rudolph (Eds.), *The relationality of race in education research* (pp. 47–58). Routledge.

Schools in remote Indigenous communities in Australia are contested sites, featuring both monitoring and compliance measures, and resistance, illuminating the state of race relations in Australia more broadly. The teachers who travel to work in these remote schools are often white and middle class, and may be motivated by many impulses, including a desire for adventure or to ‘help’.

This chapter draws from a larger study that explored reproductions of race in contemporary Australia through detailed analysis of life history interviews with white teachers working in remote Indigenous communities in central Australia. It draws on life history interviews using a post-structuralist approach, focusing on the use of language to construct knowledge and express power. The analysis adopts a white governmentality lens to illuminate the exercise of racialised power including covert modes of racialisation such as ‘dysconscious racism’, with a particular focus on how the research participants unintentionally reproduced whiteness.

For example, some interviewees, when discussing their childhoods, normalised their privileged, white experiences. Some expressed positions on morality and fairness that benefitted the dominant group, while failing to recognise their own whiteness and their assumptions about their ‘right’ to declare what is normative. When asked why they chose to teach in an Indigenous community, some articulated a desire for adventure and excitement in an ‘exotic’ location. Some also described a perceived moralising or civilising mission. Such a desire for remoteness can reproduce binary relations between ‘capable’ white centre and ‘needy’ Aboriginal periphery, sometimes obscured by a moral veneer.

The participants' accounts were undeniably raced in ways which routinely remained unspoken. Many had little awareness of social relations and saw themselves only as individuals, not as part of a white collective, which inhibited structural or reflexive critique – this was not the 'fault' of individual teachers alone, however, but speaks to the broader infrastructures, histories, and education systems that make 'teaching in a remote context' both doable and desirable for some members of the white mainstream.

Research into white 'voluntourists' travelling to overseas destinations can shed light on race relations in education in remote communities. Just as voluntourism reduces questions of structural inequality to questions of individual morality, Western schools and teachers are governed through discourses that reduce 'good teaching' to 'race-neutral' highly individualised performance. In both settings, desires to 'make a difference' can problematically reproduce racial hierarchy under a guise of good intentions. Conceiving of either voluntourism or remote teaching by way of highly individualised modes of rationalisation does nothing to challenge the racialised imbalances on which these encounters are grounded. Initial and ongoing teacher education is thus implicated in these ventures.

Take-home messages

Drawing insights from studies of voluntourism: Insights from voluntourism studies can advance our understandings of race in education in the global context of neoliberalism.

Further research into race relations in remote encounters: Further research into remote encounters is required to understand how the logics of neoliberalism are co-opted and resisted through tropes of humanitarianism by voluntourists/teachers and host communities alike, and how race-making practices in remote contact zones elucidate the racialised cultural logics of neoliberalism.

Post-structuralism as a useful lens for analysis of racialised interactions: Post-structuralism is a useful lens for magnifying these racialised interactions at the macro and micro levels, and for raising perspectives that enhance our capacity for reflection on the individual-in-context.