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Article

Preparing for Culturally Responsive Schooling: Initial Teacher Educators Into the Fray

Journal of Teacher Education
2017, Vol. 68(5) 451–462
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DOI: 10.1177/0022487117702578
journals.sagepub.com/home/jte
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Abstract

In Australia, schools are experiencing increasing cultural diversity, alongside of nationalizing assessment and curricular and professional standards. It is raising concerns regarding the pace of systemic reform and sector wide professional renewal. Culturally responsive schooling practices may be helpful at this time because it locates the experiences of learners as powerfully influencing engagement and achievement. This article reports on "The culturally responsive schooling project," a study focused on postgraduate students as they prepared for, undertook, and reflected on practicum experiences. Participants identified three barriers that impacted on their culturally responsive efforts: mentors encouraging limited and limiting curricula, pedagogic and assessment practices; mentors communicating resistance to doing things differently or valuing cultural responsiveness; and a fearful awareness of being evaluated by their mentors. The ambition of this discussion then is to encourage a rethink of the interconnections between teacher education, school leadership, and inservice professional development.

Keywords

Intial teacher education, social justice, mentoring, professional learning communities, culturally responsive schooling

Introduction

As is occurring globally, classroom demographics in Australia are changing in ways that reflect greater cultural diversity in schools. For example, in New South Wales (NSW), one in three students come from Language Backgrounds Other Than English (LBOTE),[1] with most of these students located in Sydney's southern and western regions (Department of Education and Communities [DEC], 2014b). Over the last 20 years, the demographic changes have reflected Australia's proximity and relationship with Asia, with the largest language groups now being Chinese (16.7%), followed by Arabic (13.4%), Vietnamese (6.4%), and Hindi (4%)—with Greek, Spanish, and Italian (8.9% combined) the only European languages in the top 10 (DEC, 2014b).[2] Indigenous students, though not officially viewed as LBOTE (DEC, 2014a), also contribute to the cultural diversity and represent 6.5% of the student population in NSW government schools. This situation presents a range of challenges for teachers and schools in terms of interpersonal relationships and communication; curriculum, pedagogy, assessment; and policy enactment. It also goes a long way to explaining why more than ever before teachers are asking for professional learning opportunities in teaching English as a second language (ESL), with developing their "intercultural understanding," and with enacting "culturally inclusive" practices in the classroom (Watkins, Lean, Noble, & Dunn, 2013). According to Santoro and Kennedy (2016), the circumstances have created a "professional imperative" to understand the sorts of knowledges and practices that quality teaching now requires to better respond to cultural and linguistic diversity.

The regular presence of initial teacher educators (henceforth ITEs) undertaking practicums provides opportunities for teachers to engage in a type of professional development that may assist them with responding to these demographic changes. As a former high school teacher myself, this professional renewal was a touted benefit for supervising and mentoring ITEs. As a teacher educator, it was with this understanding that I started an exploratory study involving a group of postgraduate ITEs as they prepared for and undertook their practicums. The aim of the study was to investigate the skills, knowledges, and practices that may support effective culturally responsive schooling practices (henceforth CRS). A leading figure of CRS, Geneva Gay (2010), outlines five guiding principles that underpin the approach:

1. Culture is fundamental to schooling as it shapes our thinking, beliefs, actions, and the ways we

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communicate, having an impact on policy, curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment;
2. Conventional reform is insufficient, as it tends to adopt compensatory strategies that seek to address student and community deficits;
3. Intention without action is insufficient, and good intentions can compound concerning issues if they are not built upon critically informed and reflective pedagogical knowledge, skills, and courage;
4. Connecting teaching and learning to the social experiences and cultural resources that students arrive at school with can assist with engaging in learning and improving academic achievements; and
5. Understanding that test scores and grades are symptoms, not causes.

In support of all five principles, teachers also take up classroom practices that actively address the negative effects of systemic racism and racial discrimination.

At the outset of the project, I anticipated the ITEs would find it challenging putting CRS into practice for reasons such as being learner teachers themselves, or with reflexively locating and accounting for their own cultural and racialized identities (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). However, what I did not anticipate was the participants identifying their teacher mentors as being the most influential barriers. In this article, I will focus on three barriers that negatively impacted on the ITEs in terms of enacting CRS: (a) the limited and limiting curricula, pedagogic and assessment practices the mentors encouraged them to adopt, (b) the mentors' resistance to seeing the need to do things differently or value CRS, and (c) the awareness of being evaluated and needing to please their mentors, which stifled their creativity and confidence. An aim of this article then is to encourage the creation of culturally responsive learning environments (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016) in which mentors are better supported to establish relationships with ITEs that genuinely foster the professional development of the former, and allow the development of the latter to flourish. The organization of the article from here is as follows: first, I will consider the importance of mentoring and a culture of caring, followed by discussion of CRS and why it may be beneficial for Australia, next I will outline the research project itself, and, last, attention turns to the three barriers.

Mentoring and a "Culture of Care"

> We argue that cultural and linguistic diversity is a valuable resource in urban schools and that teachers who combine culturally responsive teaching practices with caring, ethics-based approaches have the means of to do "a far better job" of educating our urban students. (Shevalier & McKenzie, 2012, p. 2)

The importance of relationships as central to the total schooling experience has been widely noted (Nieto, 2013). A caring relation is one that is built on dialogue, and according to Nel Noddings (2012), it is in and through communication that we learn about our learners, and from this, are able to ascertain if our attempts at caring are effective. The work of Noddings has been influential in support of the point that a "caring for" relationship is, or should be, the foundation of teaching and learning (Shevalier & McKenzie, 2012). There is an important distinction to be made here in terms of a "caring about" relationship, which is not sustainable and at worst can be actively unhelpful. As Gay (2010) explains it, "while *caring about* conveys feelings of concern for one's state of being, *caring for* is active engagement in doing something positively to affect it" (p. 48). When we "care for" students, there is a genuineness and generosity in recognizing and valuing the distinctiveness of the path each person traverses and the role teachers play for a time in the life of that person. In contrast with this, a "caring about" relationship locates the teacher as knowing what is "best" for a student and taking action to put the person on that path. In some instances, there is the potential for the "caring about" relationship to be unwittingly harmful. The additional worry then is the likelihood of teachers themselves being taught or disciplined into "caring about" particular groups, such as those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds who are often framed in education policy and practice as "problems to fix" (Vass, 2012).

The importance of teacher education programs working toward interrupting deficit and compensatory understandings of students (Gay, 2010; Phillips, 2012) and equipping ITEs with critical self-reflexive tools and strategies (Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Milner, 2003) with the aim of preparing them to care *for* students has been widely acknowledged. An ongoing concern, however, as Nieto (2013) points outs, is that teacher education all too often fails to provide adequate, consistent, or relevant school-based experiences to equip graduates with sufficient knowledge, skills, and strategies, and while good mentoring programs can be very beneficial, efforts in this direction have not been widely effective to date either. According to Villegas and Lucas (2002), field experience is a crucial dimension of preparing culturally responsive teachers as it is part of their socialization into the profession.[3] Moreover, arguably one of the most important, but often downplayed, dimensions of practicum is the opportunity for ITEs to reflect and learn from their efforts, rather than being evaluated in terms of demonstrating what they have learned in teacher education. Key ingredients in this regard are mentors that are predisposed to CRS and have a suite of skills and knowledge to assist the ITEs in this undertaking. Villegas and Lucas (2002) describe such mentors as having

> [H]igh degrees of sociocultural consciousness and affirming attitudes toward diverse students, are actively engaged in working toward equity and social justice, and practice culturally responsive teaching in their own classrooms. (p. 148)

As will become clear later, this was not the case for the participating ITEs. Having said this, it is my hope to illustrate that this is more indicative of systemic shortcomings, rather than the failings of individual mentors. As recently observed by Khalifa and colleagues (2016), the recognition, validating, and valuing of students and community involves more than the classroom, school leadership must be active with creating the environment and systems that actively promote and support these efforts.

Adopting a CRS approach is thus an ethical and moral undertaking. Combining concern, compassion, commitment, responsibility, and action, "teachers who really care for students honor their humanity, hold them in high esteem, expect high performance from them, and use strategies to fulfill their expectations" (Gay, 2010, p. 48). This sort of "culture of caring," as put forward by Cavanagh, Macfarlane, Glynn, and Macfarlane (2012, p. 443), involves schools and educators taking "ownership and responsibility for students' holistic well-being." Creating a culture of care is about more than "safety"—being free from harm—in schooling, it is an approach to creating environments in which there is a "freedom to be who and what we are" (Cavanagh et al., 2012, p. 445). For the participants in this study, however, rather than experience a "caring for" ethos, it was more common to encounter "caring about" approaches to schooling.

Culturally Relevant, Responsive, and Sustaining

Gaining momentum in the United States since the 1980s, proponents of CRS advocate its suitability for responding to a complex and challenging educational climate of increasing cultural diversity, which is coupled with standardizing curricular, assessment, and professional teacher standards. As was recently outlined,

> At its core, culturally responsive pedagogy includes the ways teachers thoughtfully and carefully design instruction and act in their classrooms, lessons, and behaviors in order to recognize the uniqueness of majority and minority students with the goal of preparing students to live in a world of increasing diversity. (Cartledge, Gardner, & Ford, 2009 – as cited in Taylor and Sobel, 2011, p. 16).

Importantly then, this is not an approach that should be viewed as being "for" the culturally (or racially) Othered. This sort of understanding, of viewing changes to education as part of an "entitlement program," is one of the fundamental misconceptions of initiatives designed to address culturally diversifying schools (Banks, 2014). While CRS is, and should, be focused on empowering "all students to become knowledgeable, caring, and active citizens" (Banks, 2014, p. 10), these efforts must remain wary of being "filtered through a lens of contempt and pity" (Paris & Alim, 2014, p. 86), or of further enriching the "cultural wealth" of dominant groups in society (Yosso, 2005). However, a significant concern shared by supporters of CRS is addressing the experiences and achievements of those that are marginalized and disadvantaged by current dominant schooling practices (Gay, 2010).

In support of this, CRS is a framework that centrally locates the experiences of learners as an influential dimension that helps explain engagement and achievement. Said another way, CRS actively cares for the well-being of young people as *students* and as *people*. Savage and colleagues (2011) describe this as an "authentic caring" relationship that entails more than "simple feelings of affect" (p. 184). CRS improves academic achievements while nurturing the cultural needs of students and developing their broader sociopolitical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995). It builds upon the premise that engagement improves when learning is contextualized in the lived experiences of students; that learning is more appealing and personally meaningful when embedded within cultural frameworks and filters that are familiar (Gay, 2002). In essence, it is an approach located within a "resource" (or "asset") pedagogical framework that starts with an understanding that students (and their home communities/families) have "funds of knowledge" that they arrive at school with, and these cultural knowledges (and practices) can be drawn on to assist teaching and learning in the classroom (Paris, 2012).

There are further dimensions of schooling to consider when we start genuinely thinking about teaching and learning as located within, and being undertaken, in and through, culture. It is with this understanding in mind that another leading proponent in the field, Gloria Ladson-Billings (2009), explains that teachers aligning themselves with this framework "practice a subversive pedagogy" by constantly questioning, and teaching their students to question, "the structural in inequality, the racism, and the injustice that exist in society" (p. 140). She describes this as a culturally "relevant" pedagogy of opposition that is committed to collective empowerment (Ladson-Billings, 1995), an approach underpinned by three intertwined domains including intellectual growth, intercultural knowledge and fluency, and sociopolitical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 2014). More recently, in recognition of the fluidity of culture, she encouraged the development of a "newer, fresher version of culturally relevant pedagogy," and of culturally *sustaining* pedagogies in particular (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 76).

In questioning whether culturally responsive and relevant approaches are sufficient for the task at hand, Paris (2012) rightly raises concerns that they have not meaningfully contributed to valuing and maintaining the cultural practices students arrive at school with, while concurrently extending students "repertoires of practice" to make use of "dominant language, literacies and other cultural practices" (p. 95). A central limitation addressed by this change stems from the worry that responsive/relevant pedagogical practices have often reproduced racialized understandings, practices, and hierarchies (Paris & Alim, 2014). A culturally sustaining

pedagogical approach makes a valuable contribution by opening up pathways to valuing and practicing cultural pluralism in the classroom, while concurrently dislodging Whiteness from its position of dominance (Paris & Alim, 2014).

Why a CRS Approaches to Schooling in Australia?

Influences from the early 20th century White Australia policy continue to echo throughout the social fabric and institutions around the nation; however, there can be little doubt that immigration policies from the second half of the century have substantially changed the make-up of the population (Bessant & Watts, 2007). Unquestionably, the nation can be described as more culturally diverse, or what is often loosely referred to as "multicultural"—though the culture concept itself, and multiculturalism specifically, remains ambiguous and contentious terms (Phillips, 2012). In this sense, while fashion, food, and festivals are examples of the overt and celebrated markers of cultural differences, the significance of physical and discursive markers such as skin pigmentation and language are still implicated in identifying the racialized "Other" and are deployed in ways that discriminate.

There is a currently a renewed interest with race and racism in Australian schooling, though it is often codified or conflated with "culture" and "ethnicity," and as noted by Watkins and Noble (2013), being referred to as "ethnic" is typically reserved for those that come from "southern and eastern Europe, the Middle East and Asia" (p. 15). Research focusing on race in Australian education is currently being investigated from a variety of angles. For example, a study involving over 800 students across four states revealed that schools remain the primary location where large numbers of participants, nearly 70%, experienced "normalized," everyday, racism (Mansouri & Jenkins, 2010). Presenting a thought-provoking counter point, Forrest, Lean, and Dunn's (2016) surveying of teachers in NSW, which included over 1,300 in Sydney alone, found "teacher's acknowledgement of racism is much lower than that of the communities surrounding their schools, and has a distinct influence upon teacher opinions about multicultural education and diversity more broadly" (p. 635). In addition, there has been growing focus on race and racism in connection with Indigenous students (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016), refugees (Edgeworth, 2015), and Muslims (Gulson & Webb, 2013).

In terms of my own work, stemming directly from my experiences as a teacher, I have endeavored to develop a better understanding of the role of educators as "race-makers," to account for the material impacts of "White shadows" in schooling, and to consider the influences of "race-symmetry" on education research (Vass, 2014, 2015, 2016). The Whitewashed high school I worked in was where I encountered the voices of White teachers, students, and parents that communicated color-blind and meritocratic explanations about engagement and achievements, along with racially disparaging representations about students and their cultural heritage. Being White, male, educated, heterosexual, and able bodied, the importance of undertaking critical reflexive practices and to remain wary of the "dangers seen, unseen, and unforeseen" (Milner, 2007) was something I was, and try to remain, mindful of in education research. The lines of inquiry I have pursued culminated in my interest in CRS as a potentially useful avenue to assist teachers with working toward interrupting the reproduction of racialized hierarchies in and through schooling.

A useful starting point has involved considering how CRS is to be understood and put into action in Australia, in comparison with other places (such as the United States, Canada, and New Zealand) where it has been engaged with for longer and by more people. As with other so-called "settler" settings then, Australia shares histories built on the violence and dispossession associated with colonization; the social, political, and economic legacies of relationships with England; and populations shaped by waves of migration. It is also common to hear these contexts being referred to as Western, with education systems built on the cultures and knowledge systems of the dominant group, maintaining what Banks (2014) describes as an Anglocentric curriculum. Said another way, they can be viewed as "white-dominated countries [where] what is recognized as formal knowledge, are shaped by whiteness" (Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2003, p. 66). In common then, these "settler" settings have entrenched problematic relationships with people that do not share in this White background, and racial discrimination remains an "everyday" occurrence for many.

There are, however, also important points of difference that are grounded in the particularities of Australian history. Illustrative of this point is the recommended caution of linking concerns with cultural diversity—and multiculturalism in particular—with Indigenous peoples, as this can serve as a distraction from issues such as self-determination, sovereignty, the Stolen Generation, and the wider intergenerational effects of being invaded (Ho & Jakubowicz, 2013—see also Phillips, 2012). Taking up CRS in Australia, therefore, is not a straightforward or simple exercise. This is perhaps why, as recently commented on by Perso (2012), explicit reference to CRS remains relatively uncommon despite its core principles being long acknowledged. However, Perso (2012) does explicitly call for its use, and connects the approach with Indigenous education. In agreement with this undertaking, and concurrently lamenting the paucity of empirical research, Lewthwaite and colleagues (2015) call for wider engagement from educators with genuinely listening and responding to students and their communities. As with Perso (2012) and Lewthwaite et al. (2015), I share the view that there is much to merit in explicitly naming CRS, and with connecting this to Indigenous education; however, this was not of primary emphasis in this project. Instead, this study focused on the South-West of Sydney, where the cultural and

linguistic demographics and wealth distribution disparities are converging to create geographies of "racial intolerance" (Burridge, Buchanan, & Chodkiewicz, 2009, p. 70).[4] In this context, educators must acquire "cultural competence" (or confidence) by developing an awareness and suite of skills and knowledges that are often absent from teacher education programs (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008, p. 947), and this was the direction taken for this project.

The CRS Project

In Semester 1 of 2014, an invitation to attend an information session about the project was distributed among the ITEs in the undergraduate program at the university where I am based.[5] During the session,[6] it was explained that the involvement would start in the month leading up to practicum, and would require participating in weekly 3-hr workshops that would introduce participants to CRS and offer assistance with planning for their school placements.[7] In addition, participation involved entry and exit interviews, and the researcher would visit at least once while completing their practicums. The contact details of 10 students were forwarded on, with subsequent negotiations making it apparent that scheduling the workshops and interviews amid the busyness of mid-semester was logistically challenging, and one by one, the students withdrew. The invitation was consequently extended to the postgraduate cohort,[8] following the same procedure, five initial expressions of interest where whittled down to three ITEs committing to participate despite the already intense demands on their time. As postgraduate students, they were completing two practicum placements in the year, spending a total of 12 weeks in two different schools, with the study spanning this period from April through to November.

The recruitment process should serve as a caution to those involved in teacher education, policy writers, and possibly even government representatives. On reflection, perhaps it is not so accidental or surprising that undergraduates were not involved given the difficulties of balancing employment on top of an already busy study load. Committing to participating in something in addition to this, with an uncertain payoff, is perhaps understandably unappealing. Conversations with the participants told a different sort of story, however, establishing personal points of connection with social justice and the complexities of experiencing cultural diversity. They were also aware that the formal course requirements were not going to engage with these issues in much depth. For these students then, in addition to seeing merit in the idea of CRS and an interest in learning more about it, they also found personal reasons to justify that it was a worthwhile investment of their time. As Mills (2009) research suggests, perhaps more energy should be extended to considering the significance of teacher disposition in relation to issues of social justice, and this is particularly the case in regard to teaching culturally diverse student populations.

The disposition and experiences of the participants, Fran, Alice, and Kelly, was something that caught my attention during the initial interviews.[9] Fran's background included her formative years living in different countries, attending international schools, and going on to complete a media-focused master's degree at one of the exclusive "Seven Sisters" universities in the United States, prior to enrolling as an ITE when she was 25 years old. One of the reasons she was interested in the project was because experiences in Australia interacted problematically with her Bangladeshi background, she described being racially and culturally positioned in ways she found confronting, offensive, and ultimately worrying in terms of becoming an English teacher. In Alice's case, as a 41-year-old career changer, it was reflecting on her family history and how this was linked with personal and community identity that explained her reasoning for being drawn to become a history teacher, and also her interest in the project. In particular, she discussed her mother's "German Jewish" ancestry, and her more recent marriage and having children with a Maori, as significant in shaping her awareness of their being a "fair bit of discrimination still in our society and culture." Finally, 26-year-old Kelly was also drawn to becoming a language teacher, English and French, in connection with her own personal journey, describing her background as growing up in a non-English speaking Italian household with a "rich cultural heritage" and experiencing racism in her youth that was "confronting" and "awful."

The school settings the participants experienced varied in a number of ways, though they were all high schools, situated within approximately 30 min drive from the university, and the classes they taught were generally Years 7 to 10. Fran's practicum[10] was an inner-city Muslim majority co-ed community school, and despite sharing much in common with the students and teachers, she was also aware of not quite fitting in and the wariness they maintained about her outsider-ness. As she explained,

> One thing I really understood while I was there is how segregated Sydney is and how cloistered Sydney's communities are, because there was that sense that these boys were big shots in their own community, but they were scared of what was outside. That's why they were very wary of me and I never really fully got their trust.

For their first placements, Alice and Kelly were at the same semiselective all-girl school located a short walk from the university. When asked to describe the school, their perspectives of the cultural diversity differed, but they similarly viewed the school as being relatively trouble free and seemingly easy for the students to navigate. For Kelly, it was an "Anglo-Saxon" and high socioeconomic majority setting, with students communicating the "sense that they do consider themselves among the elite . . . they had a really good attitude towards learning . . . I had few classroom

management issues." While for Alice, the school was quite diverse, with a range of cultural and language groups represented; she used words like "established," "solid," and "stable" to foreground the sense of inclusivity and support she thought the students received. Both had very different second practicums; it was these experiences that they found more challenging and thought-provoking in connection with this project and were thus emphasized during our conversations. Alice went to a low socioeconomic school with high numbers of Indigenous and Pacific Islander students (approximately 60%); she was consistently challenged by students and staff, which culminated in her reaching out to me occasionally for support. She described the school as "pretty full-on . . . highly charged . . . a volatile environment." For Kelly, her second school was "the kind of environment that I was used to." A large public co-ed school, and despite also being semiselective, she felt it had a "descent cross-section" of students with varied abilities, though she did note there was a "diverse student base" that warranted the school having a "cultural liaison officer."

A range of qualitative data sets were generated; however, this article is derived from the interviews and research journal I wrote in following informal meetings and communication with participants. These data sets are pertinent because the research was designed to be cyclical, with the researcher and the participants in ongoing dialogue that focused on developing a deeper understanding of CRS in view of the challenges/opportunities they experienced in putting these ideas into practice (Gibson & Brown, 2009). The approach resonates with Bazeley's (2013) suggestion for "planned flexibility" (p. 33) in recognition of the value of fluidity that enables educational practices and debates to be introduced as the awareness and needs of the participants shifted during the research. The study can be described as drawing on an "action research tradition" that required participants to reflexively examine their practices in response to pedagogical issues and help further our understandings of CRS in practice (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The approach accepted that meaning/knowledge was made in and through our conversations that re-examined and re-thought schooling practices (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

The data analysis was heuristic, with understandings developing in and through our conversations about what worked, what didn't, and why. The participants helped shape the analysis and decision making connected with the data in this sense, with the three "barriers" emerging from our discussions as we honed in on "commonalities, relationships and differences" (Gibson & Brown, 2009, p. 128) that the participants experienced over time. In this way, it was hearing, recording, reflecting on, and subsequently asking further questions about practices and experiences that increasingly drew attention to the barriers outlined below. The aspiration of putting into action CRS remained the focal point of our conversations as we tried to establish deeper understandings of the challenges they were encountering. The commitment to social justice was central to their efforts, and the factors that impacted on their capacity to realize their aspirations, such as the influences of their supervisors, became evident over time. The use of thick descriptions and reflexivity to examine and present the data resonates with this analytic framework and fits the research design (Gibson & Brown, 2009).

Barrier 1: Limited and Limiting Focus in Terms of Pedagogy, Curriculum, and Assessment

All the participants communicated concerns regarding being actively encouraged to limit what they were teaching students, and to limiting the time and effort they invested in putting CRS into action. The experiences of the participants resonate with Savage and colleagues' (2011) observation that efforts at improving teacher–student relationships are better understood and emphasized in schools, while more meaningful and potentially far reaching discursive and curricular reforms were harder to realize. This was even encountered by Fran in the school that on the surface may not be viewed as White-dominant, indicating the import of understanding this issue as located within the broader sociopolitical milieu and education policy context. Addressing this point, she explained,

> Adeeba was a Year-12 student who worked pretty hard, so she was very much an anomaly in that school, in terms of . . . [pause] She was very, not super focused on her future, but she thought about it and she wanted to do medicine and she was trying. She had the sense that her school and the people around her were holding her back because it wasn't a big part of the culture to want of go to the best university.

During the interview, Fran was describing her encounters with both teachers and students that she believed communicated a view that their lives and future prospects were intertwined with the local community. According to Fran, student Adeeba communicated a sense of being actively limited in terms of the scope, depth, and vision of teaching and learning she experienced in the school. Fran went on from here to say,

> There was just that sense that (a) there's a lot of family businesses to fall back on, (b) academically, it's not the most academic school. A lot of the teachers unfortunately would introduce their students [to me] by saying they're very low ability, move slowly.

Rather than seeing possibilities in connecting the lives of the students with the rich and influential intellectual and cultural roots that they shared, the students were offered a narrowed curriculum with low expectations, one that largely focused on meeting the state White-dominated requirements. Fran was somewhat confused and frustrated with the expectation that she not only accept but actively work in support of this. The result for students such as Adeeba culminated in her

expressing the view that attending high status local universities was impossible.

The worry for the ITEs was their sense that these sorts of encounters illustrate the requirement to demonstrate care "about" the student's formal engagement with schooling, in ways that inhibited their capacity to learn how to work with and show that they cared "for" their learning experiences in more expansive ways. An observation from Alice gestures to this:

> I could build a certain level of respect and understanding in a classroom, but that could be shattered in a moment by one comment from one teacher . . . there was just some really weird attitudes to diversity and culture, and some really disrespectful people in the school. That concerned me very deeply. Just on a human level, let alone on a teaching level.

Alice is commenting on interactions with her mentor teacher in the second school. She was teaching a unit on history and was reflecting on her efforts to make connections between the personal stories of the students with local history, and in general, she enthused that positive rapport had been established. This was up until the moment when midlesson the supervising teacher interjected in a way that she felt undermined these efforts. While she had heard, and was concerned about, similar comments being made by her mentor outside the classroom, when this occurred in front of the students, Alice found the potential consequences far more confronting. Alice thought this was the antithesis of CRS: the histories and stories about the students—of their families and communities cultural wealth—were not of value to the White-dominant teaching and learning that the mentor teacher publicly communicated as being desirable.

Kelly also struggled to reconcile the culturally limited and limiting views expressed by teachers at her second school. Despite having a "cultural liaison" on staff, she often described what she perceived to be the absence of culturally caring "for" students, as is highlighted in the following comment about a staffroom lunch conversation with several teachers. They had asked Kelly about her involvement in the project, and during our discussion, she was venting about the response from senior staff that suggested CRS was not needed or helpful:

> You're in a position where you do have a duty of care, [of] ensuring that your kids are learning in a safe way as best as they possibly can. But you sort of dismiss this as an idea that's not, not only too difficult, but just not relevant to you, in modern day Australia. [pause] It's insane. I don't understand what world you're living in where you think that every single kid has come from a meat and two veg white Anglo Saxon family. That is not the classroom that you're going to be dealing with. If anything, those kids are going to be the minority depending on where you teach.

For Kelly, given her teaching background in languages and English, she was surprised that her teacher education had given little attention to CRS. However, this turned into frustration as she encountered the everydayness of Whiteness at work during her practicum.

This section has shown that in slightly differing ways, the participants were developing a more critical awareness of the impact that White-dominated schooling practices had on the experiences of students that did not share in this cultural background. Yes, the ITEs were given the scope to learn "about" the students they were teaching, but they were consistently actively discouraged from using this knowledge and understanding to inform or influence pedagogical, curricular, or assessment practices that may have worked toward care "for" the students. A final exchange that highlights this point came up when Fran recounted the realization that mainstream schooling offered limited opportunities for some students to be rewarded for their understanding or academic abilities:

> [The student] gave me this really eloquent explanation of what it meant to be too one race and not enough of another race to ever fit in. There's nowhere in the syllabus that I felt that would really capture that. There's no way that I could prove how intelligent he was.

On this occasion, Fran was perturbed by the limitations of the curriculum and assessment to recognize the students' abilities when offering an insightful and well-communicated response when the conversation went off on an informal tangent. While the verbal encouragement that Fran likely provided is helpful, finding ways to formally acknowledge this would be arguably more helpful. The encounters experienced by Fran, Alice, and Kelly offer a powerful reminder that barriers to CRS remain in place despite the growing cultural diversity in contemporary schooling. Moreover, many of the teachers they encountered appeared to be actively working toward ensuring that education continued to protect Whiteness as a form of property (Vass, 2015).

Barrier 2: Resistance to Seeing the Need for Change or What ITE's Have to Offer

The reasoning behind the current interest in schooling responding more effectively to cultural diversity, as a rationale underpinning the research, was communicated to the participants at the outset. Overt encounters with deficit perspectives then were all the more confronting for them. Paris and Alim (2014) describe this as a "view [of] the languages, literacies, and cultural ways of being of many students and communities of color as deficiencies to be overcome if they are to learn the dominant language, literacy, and cultural ways of being demanded in schools" (p. 87). A deficit view lends itself to schooling practices that not only overlook the value and cultural wealth of communities (Yosso, 2005), it can result in conceptualizing these backgrounds as actively detracting from succeeding in mainstream schooling. An

observation from Alice during her second placement captures the sorts of experiences the participants encountered:

> I was told very clearly, "These kids don't work that way. These kids come from a different place." The teacher of that particular class had been to school with their parents, felt very much like she knew them very well and she had a very clear idea of their culture, their limitations as students. She didn't talk about them individually very much. She did a bit behaviorally, but not—it was like, "This class will be this way. It's Aboriginal Studies." It was that sort of attitude. I found that quite confronting.

In addition to being frustrated with being actively encouraged to lower her standards—to expect less of students—her teacher mentor was offering a reductive and fossilized view of culture. The participants repeatedly described encounters with fixed and narrow views of culture such as this, drawing attention to an ongoing tendency to essentialize and homogenize based on the false understanding of culture as innate, stable, and generalizable (Sleeter, 2012). Given these sorts of circumstances, it was further discouragement for the ITEs to question or experiment in teaching and learning.

It is arguably understandable and, indeed in many respects, desirable and expected, for mentoring teachers to speak with familiarity and knowledge about the academic abilities and engagement of students. However, communication with ITEs requires careful and considered approaches if it is to avoid reproducing deficit perspectives. The following comments from Kelly and Fran illustrate the absence of this awareness:

> Occasionally you would get a response, "Oh, that kid's just lazy" or "that's just how they are." Referring broadly to whatever this kid's background would be. That was by far the minority of them, [but] I'm coming to you [as a mentor] for help here, because I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do, and I'm trying to help this kid and you're part of the problem . . . it's really heartbreaking, it's really sad and it's really horrible seeing that that is the kind of environment that realistically you will be working in. (Kelly)

> A lot of the teachers, unfortunately, would introduce their students by saying they're very low ability. That was both true in that the students weren't operating at a level that you would expect a tenth grade class to operate on—a lot of them had trouble writing sentences and reading and writing. But also not true, in that obviously there are many things they can do, it's not just reading and writing. (Fran)

As disconcerting as they are, these sorts of observations point to broader concerns regarding misguided awareness, a lack of interest, or resistance to critical reflection on the part of experienced teachers, and from this, to encouraging and developing the ITEs abilities or reasons for undertaking this practice. The importance of critical self-reflection is widely noted in the CRS literature (Gay, 2010; Milner, 2003; Nieto, 2013); however, reflection more broadly is also a central feature of teacher education itself (often in the form of graduate outcomes) and is now commonly found within professional teaching standards (as is the case in Australia). While reflection in general is vitally important to the work of educators (Walkington, 2005), as Milner (2003) observes, in many respects, it is even more important that teachers are encouraged and actively taught how to reflectively develop a critical self-awareness of themselves as racialized (and culturalized) beings to more effectively work with culturally diverse student populations. Santoro and Kennedy (2016) describe this as an undertaking involving teachers knowing themselves as "enculturated" beings.

The widespread absence of (critical) self-reflection as an everyday practice in schools was frequently noted by the participants, in part, an insight that may be associated with the sort of reflexivity they were asked to undertake by being involved in this project. This too is highlighted by the comments from Kelly and Fran (above); however, their insights also point to the benefits of starting to think about this less in terms of the role of individual mentoring teachers, by shifting attention to consider how and why this underpins broader systemic concerns. The following comment from Alice disturbingly depicts how resistance to having difficult reflective conversations about these sorts of issues in schools can play out in the staffroom:

> A teacher said in the staffroom, [he] used the term "Abbo" [*sic*]. I was really shocked . . . He was talking about a football game on the weekend and how there were no "Abbo's" [*sic*] there . . . The other teachers—when he left the room—the other teachers went, "And he wasn't even joking!" They realized that it was a completely inappropriate thing to say. But this is a teacher who's full-time at the school and is teaching a one-third Aboriginal student population. So I found that really shocking. I was like, what is he still doing here?

There can be little doubt that openly questioning or challenging the teacher regarding why this sort of comment is offensive would lead a difficult conversation, but if teachers can't work toward this undertaking in the relative safety of the staffroom, what hope is there for classroom conversations when these sorts of sentiments are expressed by students?

The comments from the participants paint a broad picture of the schools as settings that did not see the need for CRS, particularly in relation to the role of the mentors as not perceiving there to be being any benefits from learning with/from the ITEs as they worked to put CRS into practice. As highlighted in the following comment from Kelly:

> There were a couple of instances [when staff suggested] that perhaps effectively implementing culturally responsive schooling is almost a little bit too idealistic and that it would be nice if we could do this, but . . . Whenever I would bring this up in a group of people, there would always be at least one person whose attitude would sort of be, why are you bothering? Why are you going to these extremes? They'll figure it out anyway.

> Or the worse one I thought was, well if they don't do it, that's their problem.

This illustrates that a significant concern in connection with sector wide renewal is grounded in the understandings of experienced teachers, and if they do not "see" the benefits of CRS, they may actively discourage others from working on putting the approach into action. Supervising teachers have a challenging but influential role to play in this regard, as ITEs will benefit from being provided opportunities to "challenge personal philosophies and existing practices" in support of avoiding the reproduction of potentially harmful or problematic behaviors, beliefs, and practices (Walkington, 2005, p. 63). For many involved in education then, working toward improving the educational experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse students require actively unlearning deficit theorizing, alongside of acquiring "new" knowledge, skills, and beliefs (Hynds et al., 2011). As the next barrier will consider, this is particularly the case for ITEs, well aware that the investment of their time and effort in studying education and converting this into actual employment relies heavily on the type of reports given by their mentors.

Barrier 3: Concerns With Being Evaluated During the Professional Experience

> I guess I was treading carefully because I'm on prac. So, when you're on prac, you've got to be so careful about—I really couldn't rock the boat. I had to be very careful about that. (Alice)

The experiences of Alice across her two professional placements were particularly revealing in connection with this barrier. During her first placement with Kelly, they were able to support each other in the face of the somewhat dismissive and patronizing encounters they experienced in connection with their involvement in the project. In essence, while Alice didn't feel as though her CRS efforts were overtly encouraged or appreciated, she did not communicate concerns about her progress because she was trying to put CRS into action. In her second placement, however, as indicated by the comment that opens this section, she increasingly articulated fears that her efforts may result in receiving poor reports, hence negatively impacting on her future employment prospects. Her worries culminated in asking me to observe and provide feedback on her classroom teaching, and despite the encouragement and suggestions I offered, she all but abandoned CRS toward the end of her professional experience.

In part, the experiences of Alice can be connected with the increasing emphasis that is placed on academic achievement and the market driven competition that is now called on to help justify the role out of standardized assessment and curriculum reforms (Sleeter, 2012). This can also in turn be linked with the renewed emphasis placed on professional standards for teachers. The end point that Alice arrived at then resonates with the sorts of concerns raised by Sleeter (2012),

> Teachers have less time to research and develop curriculum that students can relate to, nontested curriculum disappears under pressure to raise test scores, and teachers are increasingly patrolled to make sure they are teaching the required curriculum, at the required pace. (p. 577)

A flow on effect associated with this has been a narrowing of the curriculum and pedagogies, a "teaching to the test" response that potentially further disadvantages many students that would be better served by high expectations and an enriched and diverse teaching and learning experiences (Gay, 2010). Despite being in a different sort of school setting, Fran also reflected on this:

> [I did] feel quite hampered by that supervising teacher . . . she was very kind of . . . critical of diverting too much from what she wanted, but at the same time was very vague on what she wanted. Which allowed for a bit of playing, but I didn't want to ever push that "agenda" too far because I was afraid that would be seen as going of mark.

The experiences of Fran and Alice also point to differences in the sorts of pressures placed upon teachers in low performing, often low socioeconomic, and highly culturally diverse school settings, where the emphasis on preparing students for assessment is higher.

As noted earlier, one of the reasons experienced teachers take on ITEs is to participate in a form of professional renewal. Knowing how time poor teachers are, and recognizing the value in supporting the next generation of teachers, it is reasonable to think that ITEs efforts to enact a CRS approach would be supported. However, Kelly hints here at why this was may not be the case:

> You can turn that into a conversation about why them having this kind of attitude isn't especially helpful, but . . . having this smarmy little post-grad coming up to you, telling you how to do your job when you've been there for X amount of years. You have to pick your battles.

This is a valuable reminder about the power imbalances between mentors and ITEs, and from this, the potential for negative consequences to arise from the relationship. One suggestion put forward in response to these sorts of circumstances is for professional development and teacher education to do more in terms of preparing and repositioning teachers as learners—as students of their students—and to look at their students as teachers (Hynds et al., 2011). Also supporting this sort of view, Ladson-Billings (2014) offers the reminder for educators to work with their students as valuable "sources and resources of knowledge and skills" (p. 79). This principle

should also extend to the teacher–student relationship between ITEs and the mentors they work with.

Conclusion

The three barriers discussed here demonstrate that Alice, Fran, and Kelly were conscious of their vulnerable position as ITEs, and that this largely stemmed from being "socialized" into conforming with established practices (Villegas & Lucas, 2002) that were dominated by Whiteness (Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2003; Vass, 2016; Yosso, 2005). However, the guided reflections and sense of collegiality they experienced as participants in this project, in a type of professional learning community (Gay & Kirkland, 2003), also assisted them with understanding this as a systemic issue, with maintaining focus on the schooling experiences of students, and with having the resolve to continue learning and trying to work in culturally responsive ways in their future classrooms. Across their necessarily brief practicums, the ITEs were encouraged in this regard by sharing in and out of the classroom encounters that illustrated to them that genuine and meaningful connections with culture in schooling can be restorative and protective. Expanding on these interpersonal moments is beyond the scope of this article; however, it was encouraging to hear Alice, Fran, and Kelly remain positive about the potential of CRS despite encountering the sorts of barriers they did.

The participants could be described as remaining resolute in accepting that "genuinely caring teachers are 'warm demanding' academic task masters" (Gay, 2010, p. 75), and that this contributes to improvements in engagement and achievement. As suggested earlier, this may have something to do with the disposition of teachers, and if so, it is something that warrants further attention. It is a teacherly outlook that is complemented with total faith in the abilities of students and an ongoing commitment for action in support of social justice and equity of outcomes. While disposition in this regard is arguably important, this should not deflect attention from the significant role and influence of supervising teachers and the mentoring of ITEs. It was not my intention here to be overly critical of the mentors, and this is because for mentoring to be genuinely effective and beneficial, the role of principals and induction programs are key components that help shape and support the mentor–mentee relationship; they also assist with aligning mentoring with the dominant cultural practices in the school (Gordon & Lowrey, 2016). If the school culture is uncritical of the dominance of Whiteness and/or adopts deficit understandings of culturally and linguistically diverse students, as the participants encountered, it is perhaps to be expected that the mentoring they experienced worked toward upholding this. It is in view of this line of thinking that attention must shift to the broader educational context, and as recently advanced by Khalifa and colleagues (2016), school leaders must take a more active role in promoting culturally responsive school environments by changing an interconnected range of schooling practices. This must include mentoring initiatives that aim to learn from and with ITEs during practicums, while concurrently supporting the learning of the ITEs.

CRS can make a valuable contribution to the contemporary education climate of increasingly diverse classrooms and heightened teacher accountabilities. This is not to suggest that learning to put CRS into action is simple or straightforward. As Sleeter (2012) cautions, poorly conceptualized understanding and engagement with CRS, that fails to establish connections with improvements in student learning, can itself be more problematic than constructive. CRS needs to do more than celebrate cultural diversity or make schooling culturally safe in this regard. There must be the presence of a critical dimension that engages with the policies and practices that impact on the lives of students and the communities they come from (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Educators must therefore move beyond thinking "about" the cultural backgrounds of their students, to think deeply about the implications of teaching and learning taking place in and through culture, and recognize that caring "for" students requires being responsive to the cultures that students arrive at school with.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. "Language background other than English: students from language backgrounds other than English are those in whose home a language other than English is spoken by the student, parents, or other primary caregivers" (Department of Education and Communities [DEC], 2014b).
2. In 2014, a total of 31.6% of the students in New South Wales (NSW) government schools were Language Backgrounds Other Than English (LBOTE), and the percentages indicated are from within this group.
3. Gordon and Lowrey (2016) go as far as describing mentors as engaging in the "assimilation of novice teachers into the workplace" (p. 6).
4. As noted earlier, over 30% of the student population in NSW government schools are LBOTE, and this does not include Indigenous students, many of whom are English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EAL/D) learners. With current pre-school enrollment of LBOTE students at over 45% (DEC, 2014b), this is likely to increase as an educational concern.
5. Given the location of the university, many of the students undertake their professional experience in the South-West corridor outlined.
6. The advertisement and initial information session were undertaken by a member of the professional support team, with the name of the researcher not provided at this stage.

7. A total of four workshops were held prior to the first practicum, with set readings for each workshop. The structure and focus of these workshops were designed to assist the participants with reflecting on their own cultural locations, to think critically about relational power and discourse in the classroom, to develop familiarity with the theoretical and political underpinnings of culturally responsive schooling (CRS), and to introduce them to a range of practical/applied CRS strategies.
8. The postgraduate cohort was not originally invited for two connected reasons: first, they were a much smaller group, approximately 100 in comparison with nearly 350 undergraduate. Second, given the majority of the postgraduates are older and in many instances career change students, they tend to have personal commitments in addition to their studies. As such, I thought it was more likely that there would be adequate interest, availability, and flexibility with the undergraduate group.
9. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.
10. Fran's second practicum had to be delayed until the following year, and she was not interviewed after completing it.

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