

When talking about the role of the teacher I am mindful of a comment one of the teacher candidates at Melbourne University made a couple weeks into semester. We had been discussing educational, economic and social disadvantage and what role the teacher can play in improving outcomes for students when the teacher candidate quite angrily commented “teachers aren’t responsible for everything. You can’t just blame teachers for everything”. Of course she is right, you can’t just blame teachers, and teachers aren’t responsible for everything. The factors that produce and impact on student disadvantage and outcomes are multiple and complex. However, as they say, teachers can and do make a difference. Indeed I would be so bold to say that teachers are key to making a difference.

John Hattie quite famously noted that teachers have no control over where children come from or what they bring to the classroom but they do have control over where and what they come to. That is, no matter what each child’s circumstance may be, teachers have a responsibility, and a duty, to ensure that every child enters into a safe and productive learning environment.

Before I proceed I would like to tell you a little about the context and position from which I speak. I am part of a small team of researchers who have been engaged in a long-term ethnographic study of a kindergarten in regional South Australia that boasts one of the largest Aboriginal enrolments in the state. As an ethnographer I speak from the perspective of the particular but with a view that the particular always and everywhere reveals something of the general and therefore has something to say to broader issues. What counts as evidence for us is not quite the same as what counts as evidence in large quantitative studies but it is evidence all the same.

My two colleagues and I commenced research at the kindergarten in early 2007 after discussions with the then district coordinator of DECS who had identified the kindy as exemplary with regard to student learning and community engagement. The district coordinator invited us to undertake some work into what makes this

kindergarten successful, while other educational sites in the town had been identified as facing some significant challenges around issues related to race, income, lack of engagement and poor education outcomes. One educator familiar with the context described the town as 'a racial powder keg just waiting to go off' and each of the educational sites in the town were said to be 'hotspots for community tensions'.

The district coordinator's vision was that a study at this site may identify effective practices and elicit some ideas on how to transfer what works to other educational sites in the town. She said she wanted to 'bottle the good stuff' and hoped that what was happening at the kindergarten was not merely a matter of personalities but rather identifiable practices that would be identified, described, taught, learnt and replicated in other places by other people.

In 2009 we extended the study to include research about the transition of four children from the kindergarten into primary school. This part of the project has been helpful in providing us with further insight into what kinds of educational practices are productive and what kinds of practices are less than helpful.

In these ten minutes there isn't a great deal of time to go into detail about our findings. However, in brief we have identified a number of teacher practices that are helpful as well as some that are dangerous. I will briefly refer to four of these.

First, an understanding of one's own racial identity and a preparedness to talk about this: Aboriginal people know they're aboriginal but white people often think they are 'normal' so they don't have a racial identity. As such they bring racialised understandings to their encounters with parents and children. This means that race is only an issue for Aboriginal people and they are often required to "leave their Aboriginality at the gate" while the kindergarten or school are seen to be racially neutral and carry on without any self awareness of the racialised nature of their values, beliefs and practices. Our research has highlighted that parents are more

likely to trust and engage with those white teachers who are racially cognizant and prepared to speak about this than those who are not. However, it must be noted that this is not an invitation to dwell on race as a marker of difference. The families and teachers we have spoken to expressed no desire to make the teacher's angst around their whiteness a priority in the educational outcomes of their children. But what they have expressed is a desire for white educators to acknowledge the limits of their knowing and a preparedness to discuss matters related to their children.

Second, knowledge of the community and a preparedness to be part of the community: In our study we found that one of the key factors contributing to the success of the kindergarten was the way in which parents and community are engaged in the education of their children. As the director of the kindergarten noted: 'when you enrol a child, you actually enrol a family'. Most teachers and schools have been slow to recognize this and when they do they often make judgements about whether or not the families that have been enrolled are the 'types' of families you want to engage with in your school.

At the kindergarten there are high levels of domestic violence and substance abuse in the adult community. However, parents are treated with respect and invited into the education of their children. The quality of the relationship between families and this particular kindergarten is strong. Substantive conversations about teaching and learning occur in ways that reinforce the idea that all adults in the life of the children are working together to produce strong educational outcomes for them and that education can and will make a difference to the future of the children. This varies markedly from some of the conversations we had at the primary school in which teachers talked about there being "no point" in substantive discussions around educational issues because the parents either don't get it or don't care. Sometimes these views precede any encounter with parents but at other times these views are expressed after the teachers have met the parents and found them to lack the niceties of polite middleclass white society.

Teachers also have to understand the importance of community in the lives of the children and what the implications of this might be for the types of pedagogies they employ. For example, the relationships that Aboriginal children have with one another are often seen as disruptive to an idealized individualism prevalent within mainstream white education, and some teachers often go to great lengths to separate students who have a preference for being together in the classroom as though it is the relationship itself which is at issue rather than a lack of pedagogies that engage with an already existing relationship and bring that relationship into the life of the classroom to support learning.

Currently not enough is made of the opportunity of teachers engaging families in education. While there have been moves made to bring families and community onto school grounds and there are growing numbers of examples of this occurring, aboriginal parents are rarely afforded the dignity of being asked what it is they believe their children should be learning. Asking community what they want is vital. Often teachers find that what the community wants is that their children receive the same kind of education that kids in town receive. However, what this doesn't point to is the ways in which even the education down in town is also often failing. What education in Aboriginal contexts does is lay bare the broader failings of a system because in the Aboriginal context white education is stripped of its cultural camouflage and that which enables it to function (secret white women's business). It becomes too easy to see Aboriginality or rurality or remoteness or poverty as a problem for education rather than education as a problem for all children.

Third, teacher attitudes: All students can and do want to learn. All students are entitled to and should be provided with a rich curriculum. Aboriginal children are not different from non-Aboriginal children in wanting, and being entitled to, a rich and varied curriculum that will skill them for life. Sadly, however, white teachers frequently have low expectations of the students and tend to focus on what the children can't do rather than what they can. Research has long indicated the

importance of identifying what the students know and can do before proceeding to where they can go.

Fourth, quality Instruction:

Teaching should, by now, have moved beyond a banking method of education in which the teacher is the subject of education and the student the object, the teacher is the one who knows and the student is the one who is known, the teacher is active and the student is passive. While we like to tell ourselves that we have moved beyond this I have some doubt that we have. In terms of Aboriginal education it is also often the case that residual assumptions of racism impact on a teacher's approach to Aboriginal children and they teach as though the children are passive and come with nothing into the classroom. In approaching education like this the children are rendered as empty vessels into which knowledge can be poured. When students do not succeed and regurgitating the often decontextualised skills and knowledge given to them they are rendered blameworthy.

Is there a way forward?

My work in the kindergarten and primary school has had an enormous impact on my role as a teacher educator in the secondary program and Melbourne University. Coupled with this experience is my encounter with a rather unusual Dean of education.

At the Melbourne Graduate School of Education we have the quirky situation of having an ex-audiologist as our Dean. As an audiologist he was familiar with a medical approach to diagnosis and a clinical approach to education. Under this Dean, Field Rickards, the MGSE has begun to move towards a clinical model of teacher education and teaching more generally. So what is this particular beast?

A clinical model of teaching is one that attempts to bring theory and practice together. This is not a new idea. Indeed since Freire's praxis in particular education has sought to do this. However, drawing on a medical approach to this has perhaps

clarified, or perhaps enhanced what we mean by praxis. The clinical model aims to assist teachers in developing high level analytical and observational skills that enable them to gather data about student's capabilities and areas of need, and to use this data to guide their practice. For an education system accustomed to somewhat more humanistic ways of speaking about practice the idea of a data driven, evidenced-based, interventionist clinical model of teaching resonates with an instrumentalist politics that is deeply offensive and worthy of considerable suspicion. Coupled with this is the complication that even if it is possible to read beyond the language teachers must undertake this practice with large groups of children. They do not have the luxury of being able to undertake diagnostic assessment and interventions on a one-on-one basis. The practice of constantly removing children from classrooms for individual interventions is highly problematic.

However, what a clinical model does is overturn a common approach to education that privileges the teacher as performer and source of knowledge (some might say wisdom) when neither is concerned with student outcomes. The teacher as performer is peculiarly western approach to education that appears to have developed in the latter part of the 20th century and seems to have emerged in response to the difficulty of managing discipline problems once the more violent and punitive approaches were considered beyond the pale.

Merridy Malin's research showed that white teachers emphasis on teacher performance can be viewed as quite bizarre to Aboriginal people for whom education involves listening to children, watching them, making judgements about readiness and then responding. In many ways this is what the clinical model of education attempts to do in a systematic way and in a way that is both transparent and allows for accountability.

How would I summarise this?

I concur with Noel Pearson that “[t]he essence of a good teacher is the quality of their instruction” (Pearson 2009, 38)

Committed Teacher + Effective Instruction = Quality Teaching. (Pearson 2009, 39)

Resist the cult of personality and remember that teachers are there to teach and to ensure strong student outcomes.

Awareness of their own whiteness and how that enables and limits encounters with others.

Danger in talking about the role of the teacher even though I elected to do so because it can seem as though it is individuals who are at fault rather than broader structures and the types of discourses that circulate throughout society. It would be a mistake to reduce ‘the role of the teacher’ in aboriginal education to an individual ... The role of the teacher is as much about discourse, community expectations, teacher education, government policy and polity as it is about who an individual is and what that individual does and does not do. What remains true is that the role of the teacher is highly significant in terms of community engagement and student outcomes.

Pedagogies have to be explicit – yes, but they also have to be responsive. That is, education has to also be conceived of in terms of what the Scandinavian educators Biesta and Miedema call “A radical openness to the unforeseeable incoming of the other”. It has to be a negotiation between each party that recognizes that everyone brings something to the enterprise. However, the teacher has a key role in facilitating and responding to these negotiations and for ensuring that student outcomes remain the focus at all times. As a society we expect nothing less.

Context counts, learning counts, language counts. The role of the teacher includes a continuing commitment to asking How do we assess, identify and gather evidence about what students already know and can already do? How do we decide what they should

know and be able to do and who decides, and then how do we best help students to get there?

It is vital that teachers develop skills in being able to negotiate between a responsive, situated curriculum and a prescribed curriculum that is mandated as an entitlement for all children. They must also develop skills in utilising inquiry based and explicit pedagogies as well as an understanding that these are not discreet approaches but rely upon the effective teaching of the other if a full and rounded education is to be achieved. This is easier said than done as it requires teachers to move beyond the comfort and ease of predetermined right or wrong ways of doing things and to engage instead in a clinically informed approach to praxis.