This is the authors’ final peer reviewed (post print) version of the item published as:


Available from Deakin Research Online:

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30015899

Reproduced with the kind permission of the copyright owner.

Copyright: 2007, The Authors
Socially just teaching: knowing when differences matter.

Andrea C. Allard, Ninetta Santoro,
Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia


Abstract
Research in Australia, the USA and Britain suggests that teachers play a vital role in ensuring that 'at risk', for example, ethnic minority and/or economically disadvantaged students feel connected and engaged in learning (Croninger and Lee, 2001; Martinez, 2004; Zeichner, 1996). The study, reported on here, focussed on exploring the knowledge and beliefs of experienced classroom teachers who self identified as competent to teach in culturally diverse classrooms in order to: develop a deeper analysis of how teachers understand culture and class; examine how they engage productively with students of diverse cultural heritage; and subsequently, utilise the knowledge base to inform teacher education programs. Through analysis of the data using Critical Discourse Analysis, here we discuss how teachers' own life experiences influenced their pedagogies and how they engage with diversity, for example around the complexities of gender. We discuss how such expertise might be used to better inform the next generation of teachers.

Introduction
In Australia, like the USA and Britain, there is a serious disparity between the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of teachers and those of their students. Teachers are overwhelmingly middle-class, Anglo-Australian and female (Rizvi, 1992; Santoro et al., 2001) while 25% of primary and secondary students in Australia have a Language Background Other Than English (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002). This mismatch will continue well into the next generation. Like those already in the profession, the majority of teacher education students at Australian universities have attended mainly middle-class, Anglo-Australian schools for their primary and secondary education (Australian College of Education, 2001). Research in Australia (Allard & Santoro
2006; Aveling 2002; Rizvi 1992; Santoro & Allard 2005) and elsewhere (Causey, et al., 2000; Britzman 2003; Cochran-Smith 1995; Gay 2001; Olmedo 1997; Cockrell et al., 1999; Echols and Stader 2002; Sleeter 2001) demonstrates that because of this, pre-service teachers ‘operate from a limited base of knowledge about culture and identity’ (Cockrell, et al. 1999, p.355). Such limited cross-cultural experiences and knowledge may result in teachers being unable to engage the most vulnerable students in productive learning. This has serious and long-term implications for the wellbeing of these students as well as for the economic and social benefit of nations.


Recent research clearly indicates that highly skilled teachers are one of the most critical factors in producing successful educational outcomes for all students (Elmore 2004; Invargarson, 1998; Darling-Hammond 2000; Department of Education, Science & Training 2005). Research in Australia, the USA and Britain suggests that teachers play a vital role in ensuring that ‘at risk’, that is, second language learners, or ethnic minorities and/or economically disadvantaged students feel connected and engaged in learning (Croninger and Lee, 2001; Martinez, 2004; Zeichner, 1996). Thus, knowing how to use cross-cultural and socially just pedagogies is of paramount importance, not only for those teachers already in the profession, but for the next generation of teachers.

Gaining insights into the expertise of teachers who work in schools where those students of ethnic minority cultures and of low socio economic status have demonstrably successful outcomes is now an urgent concern for three interrelated reasons. Firstly, many teachers who are now in the teaching force and working successfully with different student cohorts are nearing retirement age. Therefore, increasingly in the next decade, early career teachers will take on the major responsibilities for teaching those students who are traditionally least advantaged by schooling (Australian Bureau of Statistics Social Trends 2003; Preston 2001) and
thus, it is vital that expertise is shared with the newer generation of teachers before it is lost through retirements. Secondly, newly developed professional standards that all teachers in most states in Australia are expected to meet require that schools ‘reflect the Government’s and the community’s goals for the inclusion of culturally and linguistically diverse students’ (Education Training Committee, 2005, p. 136). Finding exemplars of what this looks like in the classroom is therefore important. Thirdly, identifying those pedagogies that produce successful outcomes for culturally diverse and economically disadvantaged students means that the knowledge and expertise can inform teacher education courses and form the basis for further research to better prepare the next generation of teachers to work more effectively. In turn, if such knowledge and pedagogies effectively address the needs of those students least advantaged through schooling (Connell 1993; Teese & Polesel 2003) and retain them through at least Year 12, the chances of economic, social and educational benefits accruing for them, as well as for the nation, are increased greatly.

The study, reported on here, focussed on experienced classroom teachers who self identified as competent teaching in culturally diverse classrooms. The study aimed to: develop a deeper analysis of how teachers understand culture and class; examine how they engage productively with students of diverse cultural heritage; and subsequently, utilise the knowledge base to inform teacher education programs. Specifically, the project explored how teachers understood their students’ cultural diversity and how they tried to use socially just pedagogies to address the economic disadvantages and lack of cultural capital that their students experienced as new migrants or refugees.

**Context of study**

Australia’s population is one of the most ethnically diverse in the world (Howe 1999), with 23% of the total population born overseas (http://www.humanrights.gov.au). This compares to Canada with 18.4% overseas born citizens, New Zealand with 18.7% population born overseas and the United states with approximately 11.4% (Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, 2003). Australia continues to rely on migration in order to maintain population. While New Zealand and the United Kingdom contributed most migrants between 1990-2000, ‘a large proportion (40.3%) have come from a wide variety of ‘other’ source countries resulting in a great diversity
of small and emerging ethnic communities in Australia' (Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, 2003). Thus, students from language backgrounds other than English will continue to make up a significant proportion of the classroom population—whether they come as new migrants, as refugees, or as ‘international students’, that is, fee-paying students from Asia who have come to Australia to complete their secondary education. Teachers-in-preparation therefore need to learn pedagogies that engage with difference.

**Terminology**

In Australia, the terms ‘ethnicity’ and ‘race’ are sometimes used interchangeably; however, for some researchers, they are quite distinct markers of identity. According to Mason, ‘the concept of ethnicity entered sociological and policy discourses partly as a reaction to the perceived inadequacies of race’ (2000 p.93). ‘Ethnicity’ is a far more commonly used term than ‘race’ because it is seen by some scholars as having fewer essentialist connotations and fewer connections to the biological determinisms often associated with ‘race’. In her studies which explore the role of schooling processes for ethnic minority students, Tsolidis (2001 p.16) claims that in Australia, where ‘the terms ‘minority’ and ‘majority’ most commonly stand outside black-white relations, (the) naming of ethnicity as a category of non-belonging takes on a particular significance that it seems not to have in other places’ (p.13). Identity distinctions on the basis of ethnic backgrounds, for example, Greek-Australian, Somalian-Australian, or Vietnamese-Australian are more common than those linked to skin colour, as signified by the term ‘race’. We therefore use ‘ethnicity’ as a preferred term when discussing this type of identity category.

**Methodology**

Quality Teaching for Difference: Investigating teachers’ beliefs and practices in culturally diverse classrooms was a one year pilot study that aimed to:

- Explore how teachers engage with students who have different cultural and socio-economic identities to themselves;
- Advance new empirically-based data about how teachers’ professional identities are constructed around conceptualisations of ethnicity and socio-economic class;
• Develop case studies to inform the teaching profession, including teacher-educators, on best practice in addressing the needs of learners from diverse backgrounds;
• Generate new knowledge concerning how quality teaching and teaching for diversity intersect.

This was a qualitative study located in two secondary schools in the southeastern suburbs of an Australian capital city. Both Redbrick Secondary College and Grey Hill Secondary College (pseudonyms are used throughout) have student populations who are mainly either recent immigrants or refugees. Students and/or their families have come from Europe (Bosnia, Serbia, Croatia), the middle east (Afghanistan, Iraq), Asia (Vietnamese and Chinese) or the Pacific Islands (Tonga, Samoa). Seven teachers who self-identified as experienced and competent in working in diverse classrooms, volunteered to be part of this funded pilot study. Four female and three male high school teachers, ranging in age from 29 to 50 and with between seven and 25 years of teaching experience participated. Each of the seven teachers had experience in teaching students in year seven through year twelve and each taught in at least two different subject areas.

Of relevance to this paper, of the seven teachers who viewed themselves as competent in teaching cross culturally and who volunteered to be part of this project, five had English as a second language and either they had migrated as children to Australia themselves or they were children of migrants. One of the two teachers whose first language was English had spent his early years living in Africa and then migrated to Australia at age 10. Here we consider what teachers say about how they use their own experiences as means to bridge cultural and/or class differences. We examine how they make ‘sense’ of gender differences, and then, we also consider how the teaching profession as a whole might learn from and build on such expertise.

Data for the project was collected in three stages. Stage One involved focus group discussions in which the teachers from the two separate schools were brought together and asked to describe their students with particular reference to the needs, challenges and successes of different ethnic groups. Teachers were also asked to discuss critical
incidents that were representative of their day-to-day relationships with these students.

During Stage Two of the data collection, we, as researchers, visited each of the participants at their schools in order to conduct individual interviews with them and observe their classroom practices. Semi-structured, hour-long individual interviews covered topics such as the individual teachers’ schooling experiences and family backgrounds with particular reference to ethnicity and class. For example, questions included, ‘How alike or different were you to your peers at primary and secondary school?’ and ‘How would you describe yourself/family in terms of socio-economic status and ethnicity while you were at school? Has racism been a part of your own life experiences?’

More detailed descriptions of how they worked with students who were of different ethnic and class backgrounds from themselves were elicited. (eg, ‘Can you give an example of a curriculum focus or teaching strategy where you consciously addressed the needs of your students? What role do schools play in valuing and maintaining students’ home cultures? How do teaching practices contribute to this?’) In classroom observations, we looked for examples of specific teaching practices that aimed to engage with the students’ diverse backgrounds and experiences. The focus group and individual interviews were audio-taped and transcribed for analysis.

In Stage Three and on the basis of these data, we developed a series of narratives that represented either the positive experiences of teaching cross culturally or that reflected the teachers’ values and beliefs concerning diverse groups of students. These narratives were then presented to the teachers and used as the basis for reflection, discussion and critiques during a final focus group.

In our analysis of the data from the focus groups and individual interviews, we identified and grouped statements around key themes that emerged concerning teachers’ own ethnic, gender and class experiences and their perspectives on how students’ gender, ethnicity, and social class impacted on schooling experiences (Fine 2003). Drawing from methods utilised in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), specifically from the work of Gee (1990), Janks (1997), Luke (1999), and Fairclough...
(2003), we interrogated the data using key questions suggested by CDA theorists including: What are the discourses (socially accepted ways of thinking and acting) that work to produce this text? What is the discursive ‘truth’ produced in the text and how does it ‘construct representations of the world, social identities and social relationships?’ (Luke 1999, p.170) Critical Discourse Analysis as described by Luke is, ‘a political act itself, an intervention in the apparently natural flow of talk and text in institutional life that attempts to “interrupt” everyday commonsense’ (Luke 1995, p.10). We note also, following Fairclough (2003) that “What is ‘said’ in a text always rests upon ‘unsaid’ assumptions, so part of the analysis of texts is trying to identify what is assumed” (p. 11).

In light of the above questions, in our analysis we aimed to develop deeper knowledge of how teachers made sense of their relationships with students from non-mainstream cultures. We also sought to examine how these teachers positioned themselves in relation to discourses of social justice and difference. Specifically, we examined the data in order to identify when categories of difference (eg., socio-economic status, gender and ethnicity) matter from the perspectives of these teachers and how they believed such differences could best addressed via classroom practices.

While the study reported on here was a pilot with a small sample of participants, nevertheless the data analysis produced rich and nuanced insights that we believe are relevant to teacher education programs concerned to explore socially just pedagogies.

**Findings: shared experiences**

The ways that the different teachers drew upon their own lived experiences to make connections to their students suggest the close links between personal and the professional, how these inform teachers’ pedagogies and how teachers shape their relationships with students through such understandings. For five of the seven teachers in this study, they or their parents had arrived in Australia as Southern European migrants in the 1970s-80s. They could vividly recall what it meant to not speak or read English, to have little knowledge of the mainstream culture and how it felt to be ‘the stranger’ or ‘the other’. These were not imagined spaces but significant memories. The newest generation to arrive in Australia as migrants and refugees are from the Horn of Africa, from Eastern Europe or from Mediterranean countries. So,
what the teachers drew upon in their relations with these students was not a shared language or shared origins but rather memories of the pain and joy of the new-comer, i.e., migrant experience. The memories of what it felt like to be ‘the new kid on the block’ seemed to feed their commitment and passion to assist the next generation of ‘new Australians’.

For example, Vicky, although born in Australia, was the daughter of Greek immigrants who arrived in the 1970s. When asked to reflect on her own schooling she said:

I ended up at C. High School and, of course, C. High School at the time was probably one of the worst schools that you could possibly be sent to. But [my] parents not knowing any different, being the closest school, the primary school basically said, ‘Look this is your school, this is your zoning and you’re going.’ So I ended up there and that was unbelievable. The majority [of students] were Anglo Saxons. A lot of racism and bullying happened daily-- beatings, it was a daily thing. […] I recall one day one of my friends--she, just because they didn’t like the way she looked --got beaten up. She was beaten up and there was really nothing you could do.

Perhaps because Vicki’s own recollections of schooling experiences included racist and bullying practices, she spoke passionately about the need to create a learning environment based on mutual respect for her students. For example, she said:

I just want to give them the opportunity really to be the best they can be and really get them to realise that they can achieve what they want, no matter how big a dream-- they can do it. And I always use, and again I always reflect back on my experiences and I explain, you know, being the shy, introverted person that I was and, you know, I was never a popular person at school. I think, I’m very proud of what I’ve achieved, and I say to them, ‘I’ve been around the world. You can do that’. ‘Oh no, I can’t.’ ‘Yeah. [I say], because where you’re at,
I’ve been and if I can do it, I seriously believe it-- if I can do, it you can do it.’

For Vicky, the ability to draw on her own experiences of feeling ‘other’ was a powerful means to engage with her students.

Another one of the teachers, Daniel, was born in New Zealand and spent his earliest years in Africa as the son of a missionary. When he was 10, his parents migrated to Australia and settled in a country town. Daniel, recalling his own school years, says:

I think I always felt like an outsider but by grade 5, I made a couple of good friends in grade 5 and then in grade 6, I think I really felt, I started to really feel at home. But then of course the typical missionary kid thing happened, and Dad moved jobs again half way through grade 6, just as I’d started, I’d been there about a year and a half, two years I think and we moved again to XXX and I was like, ‘Oh, fair dinkum’. [...] Yeah, and I think partly I’d been very careful about making friends, because ‘Oh, what’s the point in making friends if you’re going to move again’, you know?

Daniel does not share the same experiences of those of his students who arrived in Australia as refugees from Bosnia, or Croatia or from the wars still ongoing in the Horn of Africa. He does not share with his students the trauma of fleeing a homeland that is no longer safe. But he can recall his own sense of not belonging, and as a ‘missionary kid’, of not having the opportunity to put down roots and settle. The notion of feeling ‘at home’ was a difficult one for him—and he draws on and uses those personal experiences to establish empathy with his students.

Despite speaking the language of his ‘new’ country, Daniel also remembers puzzling over cultural differences. He recalls:

I think the major difference [between Australia and Kenya] was that in Africa everyone was pretty friendly, mucked
around and I never really noticed people teasing people. Whereas here everybody teases everybody and I couldn’t really grasp that to start with. That was really, really weird and your mates picked on you and teased you and they were meant to be your friends. And I didn’t really handle that, so that left me pretty isolated and alone to start with—although I had friends, I didn’t really call them my friends because I didn’t think they were because that was not what the definition of a friend was that I had shaped so far.

For Daniel and Vicky (and others of the teachers) it is not that they have shared exactly the same experiences as their migrant and refugee students, but that they can recall enough of their own sense of aloneness, of strangeness, of alienation, of fear so that they can empathise and be open to the stories of their students. Daniel, reflecting on how he draws on his personal memories says:

I see kids from like, well I suppose we are partly a disadvantaged school, we get a lot of disadvantaged kids and get a lot of kids from broken homes and a lot of kids that are trying to fit in so I’m able to relate to that quite well. And I think when you are able to relate to kids a little bit and they see that you come from a similar background, they’re more willing to like, listen or learn or—you know, they understand you a bit more, so they are prepared to give you more of a go.

The statements by the teachers who used their own migrant or ‘newcomer’ experiences to build relations with their students raised some additional questions for us that we believe are deserving of further research. These include: to what extent does personal experience of being from a non-mainstream culture help teachers to develop productive relations with students cross culturally? How can the teaching profession as a whole learn from and build on such expertise?
Gender differences

Another challenge that was demonstrated through their comments, was around knowing which of the identity differences mattered and under what circumstances these needed to be attended to and when. This was particularly so when they considered the interconnections between gender identities and ethnicity. Con for example, when discussing his observations around how gender is enacted among the various groups, noted:

... the girls from the former Yugoslavia are not as reserved--they’re a lot more open. What I mean by open is that they’re willing to put their hand up, to raise their hand and ask questions. Whereas girls from strict Muslim backgrounds--Horn of Africa--are less likely, more reserved, a lot more respectful. I don’t mean that in a good or bad way, that the girls from the former Yugoslavia are less respectful, no, but the girls from the Horn of Africa are more reserved and it takes a lot more time to build that courage and rapport with them.

Here the two groups of girls, that is, those from the Horn of Africa and those from the former Yugoslavia are initially described by Con as binary opposites. The Horn of Africa students are more respectful, reserved, strictly Islamic and needy of his assistance. In contrast, the students from the former Yugoslavia are open, outgoing, less Islamic and less in need of his attention. They are, by implication, further along the path in terms of taking up the educational discourses available to them within Australian schooling. Clearly, he is not afraid to talk about the differences between groups of girls. However, his comments suggest that he is also aware of not constructing a hierarchy of difference and he is quick to suggest that because the Sudanese girls are respectful, this does not necessarily mean the girls from the former Yugoslavia are not. Such a hierarchy could position some girls as ‘good’--because they fit more readily into the traditional stereotype of quiet, polite and subservient female. Con appears to work within the interconnectedness of gender and culture, without privileging a particular notion of ‘good student’.
While Con has been able to distinguish between different groups of girls and knows he has to work differently with specific groups, he explains ‘quietness’ and ‘openness’ in terms of gender, ethnicity and religion. However, it is possible to argue that the quality of quietness or openness might well be related to level of language competence. For example, the girls from the Horn of Africa have not had exposure to English for as long as the girls from the former Yugoslavia. Additionally, they might have had more extensive periods of interrupted schooling, or indeed, no schooling at all. Different educational attitudes thus are not always related to socio-cultural categories; rather prior experiences, or lack of these, can impact on how students respond.

These complexities were raised in their discussions with each other, although some comments suggested the individual teachers were unsure of how important the interconnections were within any given group. The need to attend to differences within the students who shared a common ethnicity and language was also highlighted. Acknowledging what the students and their families have experienced prior to their arrival was emphasised. For example, Daniel observed:

I mean you might get a parent come in who’s kids are turning up to school, they’re not learning very much but their parents are just glad that they’re alive and that they can get out of bed every day and that they’re living. That there’s some sort of stability. And you know that can be true of a family from one place and then you’ll get another family who have very high expectations who’ve had very similar experiences in their country of birth. It just depends where the family is at often in terms of coping with the transition too. Some families come in and bang, off, they’re running you know and others are shell shocked and very dependent on that child to be the connection with the community and what’s important to that family can be somewhere to live and something to eat and have we got enough money and those sorts of things and it’s not always related directly I don’t think to social class, it’s to do with the nature of their experience.
A tension emerged between the need for these teachers to recognise and teach for students’ differences and the need to recognise and teach for students’ ‘sameness’, that is, their shared experiences, values and beliefs.

The data discussed in this paper highlights some of the complex and sophisticated knowledge developed by these teachers. The information provides valuable insights into how they think and act when working with diverse student groups. Their emphasis on getting to know their students acknowledges that ethnicity and class are important and operate as significant differentiating factors among students, differences that cannot simply be ignored. The importance of knowing their students well was emphasised often. For example, when Vicky was asked what advice she would give to a student teacher working with her students, she said:

To teach the group, firstly I’d say that the first thing I would do actually for them is provide them a profile on each student. I think it’s really important for them to get to know each student individually. Now how you do that—in class you can gauge them, obviously you’d ask. Student teachers should ask their supervisor for background information, find out where these kids come from, what is it they’ve dealt with and where are they at at this point firstly. Then you’ve got, okay you go in there and you’ve got, students need to know, not who’s boss but that they have to respect your wishes, your rules, they’re your rules okay. Some things are negotiable, other things are not. Okay and I would also say that you have to treat them fairly. I think that’s one of the biggest points, respect and just treating the kids fairly and look I mean if that student teacher did that then everything else would just fall into place. Your content is, really is the easiest part. It’s the engagement of the students, how to engage them and you find out what their interests are.

Thus, knowing their students, including knowing enough about their past experiences as refugee or migrant, valuing what they bring to the classroom with regards to gender and ethnic identities is deemed to be central to good teaching. These teachers viewed knowing about and how these experiences shape their students’ learning as a professional responsibility. Additionally, their own teaching identities seem to be
invested in the discourses of social justice—the desire to engage with their students in meaningful ways to bring about more fair and equitable educational outcomes.

Discussion
Findings from this project may be useful for the following key reasons:

• The study contributes to the knowledge base about how teachers’ practices are informed by their personal and professional identities.

• Empirical data gained through this project will build knowledge concerning cross-cultural understandings and suggest classroom strategies to learn about and work with difference in productive ways within teacher education programs.

• The experience-based narratives that are one of the outcomes from this study may be integrated into pre-service teacher education units that focus on teaching inclusively.

• There have been few studies on how Australian teachers understand their own ethnicity and socio-economic status and how these are played out through their classroom pedagogies. The findings begin to address this gap in the literature.

• While located in Australia, findings have international significance since the growing mismatch between teachers from the ‘mainstream culture’ who teach culturally and racially diverse students is common in OECD countries. Therefore the findings are relevant to other schooling systems because the stories serve as illustrations and starting points for comparative studies.

References


Sleeter, C., 2001, ‘Preparing teachers for culturally diverse schools’, *Journal of*


---

1 This project was funded through the Quality Learning
2 In Victoria, Australia, the high school is generally organised into years 7 – 12 and often referred to as a Secondary College.
3 Pseudonyms are used for teachers and for schools.