Indigenous Students' Wellbeing and The Mobilisation of Ethics of Care in the Contact Zone

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Abstract: Schools have historically been a location of oppression for Indigenous students in Australian schools. This paper explores the processes of democratising (Giroux, 1992, p. 24) the school space by Aboriginal Community Education Officers (henceforward ACEOs) through an Indigenous ethics of care framework. The enactment of Indigenous ethics of care between ACEOs and Indigenous students will be explored, with a particular focus on the use of the Nunga room (Blanch, 2009, p. 66) as a 'safe-house' (Pratt, 1991). The paucity of Indigenous ethics of care theory and the role of ACEOs' work in the Nunga room in education literature is problematic, as many non-Indigenous teachers continue to racialise Indigenous students through negative stereotypes. This is critical information for teachers and pre-service teachers as it expands conceptualisations of social justice and its link to pedagogy.

> Home, Home, my place for safe,
> Comfort zone, alone
> In times of worry, times of need,
> Greed brings me here
> To see my family, friends and countrymen,
> When I need
> Reminding of how it was,
> Is, can be, drawings on the wall
> All done by us fellas, joy flows through me,
> Welcoming is
> True, pictures tell the stories,
> Posters highlights the faces and
> Places, yeah (it's like a home), as safe,
> As safe can be
> (Faye Rosas Blanch, 2006)

Introduction

This paper is concerned with the relationship between ACEOs and Indigenous students who are required to 'border-cross' (Giroux, 1994) between Indigenous and non-Indigenous values, modes of engagement and knowledge systems in schools. The conceptual framework for this paper is contact zone theory and border pedagogy that is underpinned by Indigenous ethics of care. The focus of this paper is on Indigenous students, and whilst they share some layers of incommensurability in terms of their asymmetrical relation to dominant culture with students from

diverse backgrounds, this paper will be limited to Indigenous students and their relationship with ACEOs.

The focus of this research emerges from data gathered in South Australian public schools by the researchers. The authors' experience teaching Indigenous education to pre-service non-Indigenous teachers, working as ACEOs and teachers, as well as literature searches has revealed an absence of knowledge regarding ACEOs' critical roles in schools and their emotional labour within an Indigenous ethics of care paradigm. Both researchers used action research as teachers, ACEOs and as critical theorists who have worked in urban, rural and remote schools in South Australia. Based on this grounded research coupled with qualitative data presented in this paper (Blanch, 2009; MacGill, 2008) we argue that Indigenous students and ACEOs operate in the 'borderlands' (Anzaldua, 1999; Giroux, 1994) and their inter-relationships needs to be understood within an Indigenous ethics of care paradigm (MacGill, 2008). Advancing the theory of 'border work' presented by Giroux (1994) we argue the need for non-Indigenous teachers to also enter the borderlands to successfully navigate inter-relationships grounded in a pedagogy of care with Indigenous students.

In the first section of this the paper we introduce the concept that schools are contact zones and define the Nunga (a term used by Aboriginal people in some parts of South Australia to identify as a collective) room as the 'safe-house' (Pratt, 1991).The Nunga room is a physical building in schools for Indigenous students to work with support from an ACEO or a tutor during and after school hours. The Nunga room reflects Pratt's definition of the 'safe-house' as a 'social and intellectual space where groups can constitute themselves as horizontal, homogenous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared understanding, temporary protection from legacies of oppression' (Pratt, 1991, p. 39).

In the middle section of the paper we outline the link between ACEOs and Indigenous ethics of care that is mobilised in the Nunga room. ACEOs' roles in the school include supporting Indigenous students in class, building relationships with Indigenous students' extended family, negotiating with teachers and government agencies regarding Indigenous student needs and maintaining the health and well-being of all Indigenous students within the school site. The aim of this section is to outline the need for non-Indigenous teachers to understand the complexity of care as care has had a racist and paternalist history in colonial Australia. Importantly, an Indigenous ethics of care highlights one of many alternate modes of care that require teacher insight in order to successfully engage students from diverse backgrounds.

In the final section, we argue that the Nunga room as a 'safe house' and a 'home space' (hooks, 1990) creates a sense of belonging within the borders of the school boundary and yet within the safety of a site that is free from judgement. The aim of this section is to highlight how Indigenous students respond to care in a culturally safe environment inside the Nunga room. As outlined in the following, 'safe-houses' sit inside the contact zone of the school and are necessary sites for creating Indigenous student well-being.

School as Contact Zone

The contact zone is `the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict' (Pratt, 1992, p. 6). Schools have been shaped in Australia by the history of British educational practices that morphed into local and specific colonized spaces. These practices are not synonymous with Indigenous educational practices, which has been one of many facets that have led to radical inequality (Pratt, 1992, p. 6).

Indigenous students have been represented in educational policy as a 'disadvantaged' minority. Indigenous students are located within a disadvantage model in educational policy through the statistical analysis of measurable indicators (Altman, 2009). These statistics are normalised and signify a deficit status that ignore structural inequality. Indigenous students are located in education policy as racialised minorities (Blanch & Worby, 2010) and are subsequently stereotyped by teachers. This stereotype comes in the form of paternalism or in terms of perceiving this cohort of students as not capable of measureable standards.

Shifting this default perception to a contextualised understanding of Indigenous standpoint in relation to structural inequality would arguably generate greater reciprocity between non-Indigenous teachers and Indigenous students. This would be achieved through insight into the machinations of schooling through a contact zone perspective. Pratt's notion of contact zones where people, such as Indigenous students operate in highly asymmetrical relationships with teachers need to code-switch in order to succeed at school, as well as, within their own community. That is, by understanding that many Indigenous students routinely operate in the border zones between Indigenous communities and schools where values, ethics of care and modes of behaviour may differ, resistant behaviour may not be read by the teacher as personal but instead, as the challenge faced by the student that is required to code-switch (Giroux, 1994).

Pratt uses contact zone theory in 'relation to models of community' (Pratt, 1991, p. 1) and therefore lends itself well to the analysis of the way ACEOs support Indigenous students within an Indigenous community frame inside the contact zone of the school. Unfortunately, Pratt's theory does not offer a method to overturn racialised hegemonic power relations in the contact zone and this is the key criticism of her theory (see Harris, 1995). However, mobilising an Indigenous ethic of care within the safe house of the Nunga room and educating Indigenous students about border crossing does provide the tools for students to navigate the contact zone of the school. Importantly, inside the architectural space of schools sits the 'safe house'; the Nunga room where Indigenous students go to get support, to 'hang out' and study in a culturally safe space. A culturally safe space is an:

> … an environment which is safe for people; where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are and what they need. It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and experience, of learning, living and working together with dignity, and truly listening (Williams, 2002, p. 1).

Pratt's argues that 'safe houses' create a space where minority groups retreat to in order to generate a sense of safety. Indigenous students 'inhabit' incongruous realities and 'are forced to become adept at switching modes' (Anzaldua, 1999, p. 59). ACEOs play a critical role in supporting Indigenous students to navigate the borderlands through mobilising a pedagogy that includes overtly instructing students how to read the expectations required by white normative schooling paradigms. This is critical border pedagogy which includes:

> …the recognition of borders as marking the epistemological, political, cultural and social margins that structure the language of history, power, and difference…the need to create pedagogical conditions in which students become border crossers in order to understand otherness in its own terms… and, the historically and socially constructed strengths and limitations of those places and borders we inherit and that frame our discourses and social relations (Giroux, 2005, p. 20).

The Nunga room is a space that operates as a border within the school. When Indigenous students enter the 'safe house' of the Nunga room they sit within a space that supports their cultural identity. In this space ACEOs de-brief students about the rules of engagement expected by schools and teachers, as well as provide academic and social support

that provides the platform for Indigenous student agency. It is under these conditions that Indigenous students are able to reflect and understand the value and need for border crossing.

Aboriginal Community Education Officers: Care in the Contact Zone

Many ACEOs build on the extended family model of reciprocation in order to develop mutual trust and respect with Indigenous students. ACEOs build and re-enforce relationships with their students in the safe space of the Nunga room, but whilst ACEOs are working with Indigenous students in classroom, they are required to engage with these students in a way that reflects the teachers' expectations. Thus, in the context of the classroom, ACEOs perform a role that fits within the constructed status hierarchy as a 'support' worker as opposed to an educator.

ACEOs recognise Indigenous students' struggles, as well as, their intellectual, social, emotional and physical strengths. ACEOs' hold invaluable insight and knowledge that can positively shape teacher/student relationships, however when there is a failure by teachers to address the political, economic and social realities that shape Indigenous students standpoints (Blanch, 2009, p.122), Indigenous students exert resistance to the institutional power relations. This routinely is read negatively by teachers and yet when teachers contextualise students' resistance it shifts the polarisation between students and teachers. Pratt states the classroom is a site of power relations and:

> …[w]hen linguistic (or literate) interaction is described in terms of orderliness games, moves, or scripts, usually only legitimate moves are actually named as part of the system, where legitimacy is defined from the point of view of the party in authority-regardless of what other parties might see themselves as doing. Teacher-pupil language, for example, tends to be described almost entirely from the point of view of the teacher and teaching, not from the point of view of pupils and pupiling (the word doesn't even exist, though the thing certainly does). If a classroom is analysed as a social world unified and homogenised with respect to the teacher, whatever students do other than what the teacher specifies is invisible or anomalous to the analysis (Pratt, 1991, p. 5).

ACEO see these invisible acts as they are familiar with their students' body language and state of well-being. ACEOs' insider/outsider status as an employee of the school and as an Indigenous person understands the impact of mis-recognition on personhood. To be 'misrecognised is not to suffer distorted identity or impaired subjectivity…it is rather to be constituted by *institutionalized patterns of cultural value* in ways that prevent one from participating as a peer in social life' (Fraser & Honneth 2003, p. 29). Arguably, the recognition of ACEOs' emotional labour and institutional inclusion of Indigenous ethics of care in schooling is a human right (MacGill, 2010).

Indigenous Ethics of Care

There is limited theoretical knowledge for non-Indigenous teachers to understand Indigenous ethics of care as an educative model. This model emerges from the values and expectations inherent within extended family models of care that are formed through kinship ties, obligatory practices, expectations and the roles and responsibility of care by siblings, parents and aunties and uncles (MacGill, 2010). These expectations vary from community to community, for instance Anangu (self-referential term for Pitjantjatjara/ Yankunytjatjara people literally meaning 'person' or 'people' in the Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara language group) philosophy of Ngapartji

Ngapartji as Tur (2010) emphasises is to ' reciprocate, to give and take for the mutual benefit for those engaging in a shared activity' (Tur, Blanch & Wilson, 2010, p. 62). Acts of engagement include cultural acculturation by parents, aunties and uncles that share equal responsibility in passing down knowledge and shaping children's world view and way of being in the world. Indigenous ethics of care is embodied through raising children to be self-reliant, conscientised as raced beings, sharing, child to child nurturing responsibilities and inter-family disciplinary models.

Conversely, white ethics of care is based on the nuclear model that relies on the mother and father to acculturate children into western norms, values and practices that are reflected in mainstream education. Whilst this model may vary, the traditional nuclear model is gendered, classed and raced. The implications of ethics of care inside schooling are significant as expectations, such as the role of the teacher as an authoritative figure during school time routinely assumes that the manners and mores acculturated at home will be congruous in the school site.

ACEOs operate as parents' *in-situ* for Indigenous students as their support work in an Indigenous ethics of care model assumes parental responsibilities that go beyond their job description. This is further complicated by the fact that ACEOs often have a connection and understanding of the students' home life and community context, because they are intimately embedded within the Indigenous community. The advantage of this position is knowledge about the student's life thus enabling the ACEO insight into how to appropriately care and support when issues arise.

Many Indigenous students have been raised within extended families and therefore there are many connections between learning that is linked to the ethics of care that informs classroom practice and behaviour management. This makes the classroom a contested site, and possibly even dangerous for the ACEO and Indigenous student who have to work and learn within a space that is ignorant of Indigenous knowledge (Rigney & Hemming, 2009). In this context, Nunga students resist institutionalised control and 'paradigms of order and cultural priority' (Blanch, 2009, p. 83) that are embedded in the values and mores of colonialism and racialisation (Blanch & Worby, 2010, p. 9).

ACEOs 'break-in' non-Indigenous teachers that work closely with them, such as the Aboriginal Education Team (AET) who learn to understand Indigenous students' body language and contextualise acts of resistance. The AET team consists of a small number of non-Indigenous teachers and ACEOs that work together closely and as a result AET's learn to border cross as teachers. Emotional capital is built over time through the understanding of Indigenous ethics of care that create positive acts of engagement that is grounded in trust between AETs, ACEOs and Indigenous students.

The perception of care by Indigenous students reflects a relationship that is grounded in a sense of knowing, belonging and what is described as connectedness. An example of this connectedness is reflected in the following voice of one young Nunga student in reference to two Indigenous men who worked as ACEOs in the school: 'I see two black fellas walking through the school it's just what I see' (Blanch, 2009). This comment although seemingly simple, highlights the importance of the visual presence of Indigenous people. Seeing ACEOs in the school as DECD (Department for Education and Child Development) employees supports Indigenous students' self-identification within the school. The presence of ACEOs in schools for Indigenous students informs an Indigenous ethics of care that extends beyond the community and into the space of the school. However, as discussed in the following safe houses are still required for Indigenous students and ACEOs within the contact zone of the school.

The Nunga Room as a 'Home-Space' and 'Safe-House' for Indigenous Students.

Pratt argues 'where there are legacies of subordination, groups need places for healing and mutual recognition, safe houses in which to construct shared understandings, knowledges, claims on the world that they can then bring into the contact zone' (Pratt, 1991, p. 6). The Nunga room is a safe-house that is situated in the school and is often located away from the main classrooms, staff room and reception area of the school. The Nunga room within a school can be perceived as a 'problem' for teachers. In the eyes of some teachers, this 'safe-house is seen as 'a place of avoidance' for Indigenous students. The Nunga room is under surveillance by some teachers who view the room negatively, rather than a space that positively enhances Indigenous community presence in schools.

Inside the Nunga room Indigenous students can literally and metaphorically 'move' freely (Blanch & Worby, 2010, p. 5). The space is available to Nunga students, parents, community members and other 'visitors' that are employed to engage in teaching/learning activities. The Nunga room allows for alternate teaching/learning models such as the talking circles, story-telling and creative learning activities. Communication in the Nunga room involves open circle discussions and the freedom to summon up contrary dynamics in need of resolution. There are tags by students on the walls, music is played and there are food breaks that assist in the breakdown of rigid communication conventions. Giving and sharing of food are common acts that provide substance and sustenance (hooks, 1990) and contribute to the establishment of a liberating space. This combination of sharing, identification and representation are summed up by a student B2K when he states, '…the way I look at it, yeah pictures on the wall, like Aboriginal drawings and stuff. Yeah it's like a home, you know what I'm trying to say? It's like a home for like the black kids cause, they know they're welcomed here and stuff like that yeah' (B2K, conversation, June, 2005 cited in Blanch 2009a).

The safe space of the Nunga room gives students the opportunity to create a sense of belonging inside schools and an opportunity to 'voice' their resistance through politicizing their identity as young Nungas (Tur, Blanch & Wilson, 2010; Rigney & Hemming, 2009). There are three aspects of care enacted in the Nunga room and these include the verbal acknowledgment of being cared for, performance of care through physical fulfilment, such as sharing food and the reciprocation that occurs between the carer and the student who is cared for. These elements can be identified in the talking circle conversations that occurred in the Nunga room between Blanch, the ACEO and Indigenous students.

> FRB: so do you reckon the people that work with you kids, say AET and ACEO, M and Principal do you think they actually care.
> ACa: D does, he talks (ask ACEO for some food) ACEO replies it's finished.
> ACa: So what were you saying?
> FRB: School, do think people like ACEO, AET, Principal, Ms M look after you guys? Care for you guys?
> aCa: Yeah (speaking in a quieter tone)

Some of the issues that were raised within the talking circle in the Nunga room highlight the response of the boys in relation to the ACEOs and the AET team. The students name them as carers and people who understand them. They also define teachers who care and value them as those that listen and hear them. As aCa responds when asked, how would you define care:

> aCa: Some teachers are alright, because they listen to what you got to say and, they make you don't be stupid and that there and,

> try and make, you know. They know how to deal with kids and
> some of them other teachers are just stupid.
> FRB: But how do you see 'care'?
> aCa: I don't know, if they take the time to listen to you and that
> there and like help you out and work with you….
> <div align="right">(aCa, conversation, November, 2005)</div>

The teachers who were seen as valuable and an asset to the students were the teachers who listened. In this case, the key element is the ability to hear, therefore, hearing and being heard is critical to Indigenous student wellbeing. As further conversation explored in the Nunga room show ACEOs are very important in contributing to the schooling experiences of Nunga students:

> FRB: You find it okay here B2K.
> B2K: Yeah it's alright.
> FRB: Is there a favourite teacher who you like, who you think takes the
> time out for you.
> B2K: I think the AET and AEW (ACEO) treat us like blackfellas, like
> Aboriginals (Conversation, November, 2005).

Being recognised as Indigenous is a significant factor that shapes a sense of belonging that informs the feeling of being 'cared for' as identified in the above quote by the student towards the ACEO and AET team. The definition of 'care' by students in this context is the availability of the carer and the ability to understand them as individuals. Hearing is more than just physically hearing the words, but also contextualising and embodying the students' standpoint.

The Nunga room provides a space for Indigenous students and ACEOs to enact ethics of care in a trusted and safe environment. As Blanch and Worby state, 'we observed that students move freely in the Nunga Room, even though it is part of the ordered space of schooling…and student life journeys came together' (2010, p. 7). Understanding the Nunga room as a 'safe-house' is critical for teachers as it provides a framework that is not grounded in a negative perception. Instead, thoughtful considerations of the role of the Nunga room as a safe space for well-being and care within the school help shape teachers interactions with Indigenous students that facilitate openness and trust.

However, when non-Indigenous teachers charge into the Nunga room without knocking, as observed by Blanch during a conversation with students, it signifies 'a range of competing meanings with the dominant ones reflecting existing power relations' (Hemming & Rigney 2003). It is therefore critical for teachers and pre-service teachers to be cognisant of the Nunga room as a 'safe house', thereby shifting misconceptions towards the space. Knock and being invited into the space, as is the custom throughout the rest of the school, rather than barging into the space uncritically provides a symbolic gesture that recognises the role and value of the Nunga room as a safe house for learning.

The Nunga room is a safe/home/space (hooks, 1990) where Indigenous students have the opportunity to carve out a sense of belonging within the boundaries of the school fence. It is therefore critical for teachers to understand Indigenous students' engagement with the Nunga room as a space of hope in the contact zone. In order for this to occur, recognition of the way in which power and knowledge operate in schooling is critical as a point of entry for teachers and pre-service teachers to understand. Secondly, within this understanding comes the recognition of teachers' complicity in minority students' agency or oppression. In order to support and facilitate agency teachers need to develop a critical understanding of the social, historical and political position of their students to successfully educate their students.

> be cool, no fool, this school is my stage to perform the
> moments of sadness, badness

gladness, madness, people think they know me
show me how to do this thing, expect this
apologize, smile, be quiet, stay still, no thrill
it kills me, to do it their way, sway to their tune
make my own rules, do this my way
play this game, gonna play it clean
scheme glean the best from the situation
maintain my Self, apologize no way
ostracized if need be, I stand tall, won't fall
resist the play
put on a face, hide behind my mask, take it to the core
store my anger, use, even abuse, pursue the journey, gotta get
to the other side, look behind me, know my enemies
naked to the world, vulnerable and exposed
must stay strong, not long, fake it,
until I make it (Faye Rosas Blanch, 2007)

Conclusion

The Nunga room is a safe space for ACEOs and Indigenous students within the borders of the school boundaries. Pratt and hook argue safe houses and home-spaces are essential for minority students to generate a sense of community within complex racialised contact zones. ACEOs provide the care and support Indigenous students need to succeed at school both socially and academically. We have argued throughout this paper that ACEOs mobilisation of Indigenous ethics of care in the Nunga room provides Indigenous students a reciprocal caring paradigm that generates a sense of belonging.

However, ACEOs have limited powers within schools due to their low status. The institutional failure to recognise ACEOs' complex roles as border workers is problematic. ACEOs share with Nunga students a standpoint that has been raced in particular ways in Australia. This absence of recognition leads to disempowerment and lack of agency for ACEOs to care for Indigenous students' wellbeing. There are only a few teacher education degrees in Australia that include the role and value of ACEOs within their Indigenous education topics. ACEOs' can provide non-Indigenous teachers support and insight into Indigenous students' needs and their families and therefore it is critical that the role of ACEOs and the Nunga room be taught to pre-service teachers. Moreover, contextualising schooling as a contact zone within a power/knowledge praxis within a pre-service education degree is fundamental for those who are preparing to engage in the complex role of being a teacher. As Giroux (1994) argues it is not just the responsibility of students to learn how to border cross in cross cultural context, but it is also the responsibility of teachers to learn border pedagogy.

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