

THE ROLE OF AGENCY IN DETERMINING AND ENACTING THE PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES OF EARLY CAREER ABORIGINAL TEACHERS.

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Abstract

This study explores the role of agency in early career Aboriginal teachers expressions of their professional identity. It argues that in the context of teaching, opportunities to exercise personal agency are critical to the development and maintenance of a 'healthy' professional identity, particularly for those traditionally disempowered by the mainstream system, such as Aboriginal teachers.

This qualitative study employs narrative methodology for data collection and analysis, and subsequent construction of three composite narratives. These are shaped from fifteen in-depth interviews and two focus groups with early career Aboriginal teachers.

Findings revealed that agency is a key factor in the development of early career Aboriginal teachers professional identities, and that the extent to which Aboriginality plays a role in enacting agency is dependent upon individual lived experiences as well as personal responses to school contexts.

This study challenges normative discourses around Aboriginal teacher's actions and responses in specific school contexts, and opens up spaces for Aboriginal teachers to determine their own professional identity either as part of or separate from their Aboriginality. Relevant issues for early career Aboriginal teachers have significant implications for teaching contexts, teacher education, and their transition into teaching.

INTRODUCTION

The experiences of early career teachers have been increasingly well documented in the literature on teaching and teacher education over the last two decades (See Zembylas, 2005; Reid & Santoro, 2006; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Pearce & Morrison, 2011). As a key element of this experience, teacher identity has accordingly garnered strong focus, however an examination of the literature reveals a dearth of research on the experiences of teachers drawn from ethnic, minority, 'Other', or 'culturally different' groups, including Aboriginal teachers. Much of the literature that does exist emphasises the exclusion and estrangement of the 'Other' from the Australia's hegemonic white culture (Reid & Santoro, 2006; Santoro, Kamler & Reid, 2001, Reid, Santoro, McConaghy, Simpson, Crawford & Bond, 2004). While this study acknowledges the underlying structures and practices of this exclusion, it will move beyond dialogue around normative discourses to expose the complexity of issues around professional identity formation for Aboriginal teachers.

By and large, Aboriginal people tend to enter the teaching profession based on a strong desire to improve Aboriginal student outcomes. Many Aboriginal teachers tend to draw strongly upon their personal educational experiences – whether negative or positive – to locate themselves as role models for Aboriginal students in the hope of ‘making a difference’ or contributing to student success (Santoro, Reid, Crawford & Simpson, 2011). Their desire to become a teacher can often be motivated by a passion to teach Aboriginal curriculum, in particular, the ‘true’ history of Australia, and equally, to foreground the principles of equity and social justice in their pedagogy (Groundwater-Smith & Sachs, 2002). These aspirations underline a sense of agency that is enacted through the development and negotiation of personal, professional and situated identities that overlap in complex and sometimes contradictory ways (Day, Sammons, Stobart, Kington, & Gu, 2007; Day & Kington, 2008; Parkison, 2008, Mockler, 2011, Pearce & Morrison, 2011).

ABORIGINALITY

Aboriginal identity is at the confluence of the personal, professional and situated dimensions of identity. In the lived experiences of Aboriginal teachers, Aboriginality may be central to their life and work, or it may play a more peripheral role; equally it may be strongly self asserted or positioned by others. In any case, its presence exists if for no other reason, than the pervasive politicisation (Dodson, 2003; Reid & Santoro, 2004; Mockler, 2011) of everything Aboriginal within the postcolonial Australian context. However, Dodson (2003, pp. 38-39) maintains that contiguous to colonial discourses, Aboriginal discourses have continued to create and re-create self representations (identities) that have evaded the policing of sanctioned versions, and that these identities have given rise to Aboriginalities drawn not only from history and past representations, but significantly, from experiences of self and communities. Huggins (2001, p. 44) states that although difficult to articulate, Aboriginality is best described as “a feeling of one’s own spirituality” that forms the core basis of identity. Her explication conflates Aboriginality with personal identity, which she describes as a “sense of deep, proud cultural identity” for Aboriginal people, which is lived and expressed every day through humour, language, art, values and beliefs, and family and community relationships. Moreover, the range of identities that are taken up by Aboriginal people are significantly underpinned by what Reid and Santoro (2006, p. 148) maintain is the resilience of a continuous and overarching shared Aboriginal culture, and historical experience as ‘Other’.

AGENCY AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

Conceptualising identity can be a challenging and elusive endeavour, not least because it is examined through multiple lenses, across several disciplines, and with diverse focus and perspective (See Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004; Hall, 2000). In contrast to traditional conceptions of identity as fixed and stable (Hall, 2000, p. 15), teacher professional identity is a complex, evolving, and continuing process that merges the personal, professional and contextual planes of ‘becoming’ and ‘being’ a teacher (Beijaard. et al., 2004). In Sach’s (2001) conceptualisation, professional identity is “...a set of externally ascribed attitudes...imposed upon the teaching profession either by outsiders or members of the teaching fraternity itself” (p.153). She argues that in the current climate of rapid change, indeterminacy and educational restructuring, identity is mediated by teachers’ aspirations, personal experiences both in and out of school, and beliefs about their own teacher identity. Similarly, Mockler’s (2011) work highlights the role of external political environments and neo-liberal approaches, arguing that the process of quantifying teachers’ work reduces practice to a ‘what works’ dogma (p.526) that essentially works against the development of an activist democratic professional identity. For beginning teachers, the challenge of mediating personal beliefs about the self

and professional identity with the cultural and institutional constructions of 'teacher' is considerable (Gomez & White, 2009, p.1016); a situation that becomes increasingly problematic when a "...culture's definition of normalcy is inconsistent with the personal beliefs or values of the individual seeking to become a teacher" (Alsup, 2006, p. 64).

Zembylas (2003, p. 214) argues that the construction of professional identity is highly contingent upon power and importantly, human agency. According to Ketelaar, Beijjard, Boshuizen and Den Brok (2012, p. 275), the extent to which a teacher is able to assert their personal identity largely depends on both the degree of agency and level of control that they experience within their work situation, and this in turn is chiefly determined by the school context and culture and the teacher's social location within this context. Hence, experiencing autonomy, self-determination, and space for negotiation is critical to the establishment and ongoing development of a positive and secure professional identity. According to Bandura (2006, p.164), individuals are not simply products of their life situations or mere observers of their own behaviour, but rather, are active contributors. He articulates four key attributes of human agency: 'intentionality' – the formation of intentions, in particular, a plan of action and strategies for accomplishing this; 'forethought' – the setting of goals and anticipation of possible outcomes of future actions so as to direct efforts; 'self-reactiveness' – motivating and regulating the execution of an action plan; and 'self-reflectiveness', as the "...most distinctly human core property of agency...[whereby individuals]...reflect on their personal efficacy, the soundness of their thoughts and actions, and the meaning of their pursuits, and they make corrective adjustments if necessary" (p.165).

Bandura (2006, p. 170) maintains that as agents, individuals create identity connections through their human relationships and work pursuits, and interpret themselves as a continuing person over different phases of their lifetime, essentially projecting themselves into the future and shaping their life course through their goals, aspirations, social exchanges, and action plans. This conception is reflected in Sfard & Prusak's (2005, p.18) constructs of 'actual' and 'designated' identities, in which actual identity is the current state of identity, and designated identity is the expected, future state. In this context, agency refers to the way in which individuals narratively construct their identities to fulfill their designated identity. Sfard & Prusak (2005, p.18) refer to the gap between actual and designated identities as 'critical stories' that:

...would make one feel as if one's whole identity had changed[and]... lose [the] ability to determine, in an immediate, decisive manner, which stories ... were endorsable and which were not.

When designated identity is constructed by others (often in positions of authority and power) who place this identity within a particular 'expected' or 'preconceived' socio-cultural framework, a loss of agency inevitably occurs. This is not necessarily an unusual experience for early career teachers (Ewing & Manual, 2005), and more often than not affects Aboriginal teachers (Reid & Santoro, 2006) at various stages of their career.

Bourdieu's (1997) constructs of habitus and capital also provide useful frameworks for exploring the formation of early career Aboriginal teacher identities. Bourdieu accounts for the structure and functioning of the social world through the arrangement of the different forms of capital; social capital

which is made up of connections that enable access to beneficial social networks (1997, p. 47); and cultural capital, which, in its institutionalized state, is embodied in academic qualifications that produce a “certificate of cultural competence...” (p. 50). Bourdieu’s Habitus represents the manner in which individuals structure and live their lives on a daily basis, and encompasses “... the set of beliefs, attitudes, skills and practices employed by individuals in their daily life ...” (Habibis & Walter, 2009, p.47). Significantly, “The agent perceives, understands, evaluates, adapts, and acts in a situation according to his or her *habitus*. The actions produced and their results can have a varyingly important influence on the individual’s perception of things and, in consequence, on his or her dispositions (toward action and perceptions)...” (Hilgers, 2009, p. 731).

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study employs narrative methodology in collecting and analysing data, as well as in the narratives constructed from the data. Connelly and Clandinin (1990, p.2) claim that the basis for employing narrative inquiry to study experience is the perception that humans, both individually and collectively, fundamentally lead storied lives. In their longitudinal study of Aboriginal teachers, Reid, Santoro, McConaghy, Simpson, Crawford and Bond (2004, p.309) stated a clear “... need for detailed first hand accounts of the experience of Indigenous teachers... [and a] reconceptualisation of the issues confronting Indigenous teachers in their initial training and working lives” as well as ‘giving voice’ to those often silenced or not heard (Britzman, 2003, Pearce & Morrison, 2011). Moreover, Clandinin and Rosiek (2006) assert that narrative inquiry provides opportunities to explore the social, cultural and institutional arrangements in which individuals experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed and enacted. It is this aspect of the narrative approach that is particularly useful for examining the lived experiences of Aboriginal teachers within the context of wider socio-cultural influences and power structures.

Participants in this research study are early career Aboriginal teachers who were enrolled in the Bachelor of Education (Secondary: Aboriginal Studies) at the University of Sydney; a block-mode, away-from-base, equivalent full-time program. Volunteers were sought from the year three and four cohorts and where possible, followed through to their early years of teaching. Fifteen focused conversational interviews (Goodfellow,1995) were conducted over two years and five participants were further interviewed and collaborated with through ongoing discussions. Of these, three entered teaching and two remained in previous employment.

One focus group of early career teachers and one of preservice teachers were held and discussion triggers emerged from initial analysis of interview transcripts. Friendly and collegial interactions occurred in a relaxed and effusive atmosphere, providing rich data sources. Semi-structured cooperating teacher (practicum supervisors) interviews were conducted, and they further illuminated themes emerging from preservice teacher interviews as well as providing insight into the influence of the specific school context on the preservice teacher. Three composite narratives were constructed which drew on these sources in an attempt to articulate collective and individual stories of what being an Aboriginal teacher might mean.

Analysis involved reading transcripts vertically (within-case) and horizontally (cross-case) (Goodfellow, 1995) to identify key emerging themes including recurring discursive patterns (Santoro, Reid, Crawford & Simpson, 2011) as well as atypical and unexpected responses. Participant and researcher collaboration was ongoing so as to work towards more accurate reflection of participant voices and experiences.

Researcher collaboration with critical friends, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, provided valuable intercultural dialogue, extensive expertise and experience from insider and outsider perspectives (Santoro et al., 2011) and supported researcher reflexivity on positioning and predisposition as a non-Aboriginal researcher in an Aboriginal context. Pertinent to this is the researcher's own identity as a parent of Aboriginal children with long standing ties to the local Aboriginal community through family networks, professional work as a teacher and teacher educator and personal involvement in local sports.

FINDINGS

Janaya's Story

Janaya is a young Aboriginal high school teacher who identifies strongly as Aboriginal through her upbringing and obvious appearance as an Aboriginal person. She was raised in a remote New South Wales country town with a large Aboriginal population and the extended Aboriginal family on her mother's side means that she is related to most people in town. Through her childhood experiences, she articulates a deep knowledge of kinship ties, connection to country, culture and heritage and what this means in terms of her responsibilities and obligations. Her father is Vietnamese and Janaya visited Vietnam to meet her father's people and learn about the culture so that she could pass this on to her children. Janaya believes that she had a positive and optimistic upbringing and that this influences her approach to life in general.

Janaya states that she didn't have role models in terms of education or career when growing up but "... my parents always wanted us kids to do something with our lives because of them having a hard time of being together, as elements of our town are racist and they [parents] never finished school either". Like many teenagers, Janaya talks about distractions in high school, of feeling embarrassed about being too smart and standing out, and of getting further behind in her schoolwork. She recounts becoming more aware of teacher racism towards Aboriginal students as she got older but also remembers a teacher who believed in her, gave her extra attention which contributed significantly to her completing school and wanting to become a teacher herself.

Janaya is currently in her second year of teaching at a large disadvantaged secondary school in the western suburbs of Sydney. She enjoys teaching Ancient History and deliberately circumvents the responsibility of taking on Aboriginal education at the school.

John's Story

John is a mature-aged father who has recently uncovered his Aboriginal family background, lives in

an area outside of where he grew up and is accepted locally he believes, largely due to his extensive involvement in sports. He is generally perceived by those who don't know him as having a non-Anglo ethnic heritage, and spent many years in blue-collar work.

John didn't have any contact with his Aboriginal family when growing up. He states that he grew up 'white' and reflects that playing sport and belonging to sports clubs constituted his 'community'. He explains that it is only in the last ten years that he has tried to find out more about his people, his culture and family history. "I identify but don't pretend to know my culture in depth so I ask someone who knows it to do cultural stuff for schools".

John's recollections of his experiences in education are that "... if I wasn't so good at football, I wouldn't have been allowed to stay in school". Towards the end of his secondary education, John's family moved away from the city because "... my mother's idea [was] to get me away before I got into too much trouble". Providing a role model for Aboriginal kids, in particular boys, was John's key motivating factor for entering teacher training.

Due to a particularly difficult final Professional Experience that undermined his teaching confidence, John has not taken up a teaching position and is currently working in the sports media area doing freelance work. However, the work is inconsistent and he is still considering a teaching career. He is concerned that if he leaves it too long it will be too late.

Anne's Story

Anne is a grandmother and high school teacher who identifies strongly as Aboriginal though is often not recognised as such by those who don't know her. Her family was never involved in the local 'fragmented' Aboriginal community (as Anne recalls) and so grew up without the experience of living in an extended family/community environment. Anne's mother and uncle had been victims of the Stolen Generation and so "Mum did not openly acknowledge our Aboriginality for fear of repercussions". However, Anne remembers that during a period of significant social change in Australia, her mother began to open up to her children in the privacy of their home. "My Mum was the best storyteller, and looking back I now realise how painful it must have been for her, because it was all true, and all involved her".

Anne reports that her brothers didn't cope well with school. "They were darker but didn't really identify, explaining it away as another family attribute or background. They were often in fights and dropped out of school early." Anne identifies these negative experiences as a key motivating factor in her decision to become a teacher believing that she could make a difference for Aboriginal students.

Currently, Anne lives 'off-country' (a term she uses to locate herself in relation to the local people) in a large regional centre, where she has raised her children and worked in a number of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community jobs. She has also worked part-time as an Aboriginal Education Officer at

a local high school and because of this, believes that the local Aboriginal community accepts her. Anne went on stress leave in the first year of teaching after being placed in a high school away from home and being forced to teach some classes out of her subject area as well as serious family illness back home. She is currently on 'Leave Without Pay' awaiting another appointment from the Department of Education and Communities closer to home.

DISCUSSION

Findings from this study highlight the diversity of teachers' experiences in schools, and challenge some of the normative discourses about Aboriginal teacher responses and actions within these contexts. The construction of Aboriginal teachers as 'Other' often results in disempowerment through negative and generalised perceptions of Aboriginality (Santoro, 2007). Janaya disrupts these discourses through conscious self-positioning as a teacher whose professional credibility is her principal concern.

My Aboriginality now plays little part in my identity as a teacher. I was employed as a teacher and that's what I focused on; teaching and being the best I can be at it. My position was totally preconceived. Now however, time has allowed for me to create with my own uniqueness and skill from experience in the school. I have even had the following said to me, 'you're not focused on Aboriginal stuff are you'

To some degree John also contests these discourses, and recalls how he managed to regain some sense of control after feeling demoralised from being constantly undermined by his cooperating teacher.

In a way I also turned that into a positive by making it a challenge for me to prove to her [cooperating teacher] that I might be Aboriginal but I can do just as good as she can ... and kids coming past and giving me a compliment, 'great lesson, sir', while she was there, this would piss her off I think. That's how I got some of the power back. She sort of laid off a bit after that.

The often articulated notion that Aboriginal teachers can bridge gaps between the community and the school is also challenged in this study, and all three teachers acknowledged that if an Aboriginal teacher is from outside the local community then certain protocols and considerations must be taken into account. Janaya, who is not teaching in her community, explains:

They [the community] have been good on the surface... But they look to see how much of my culture I know. Working with Aboriginal people is difficult especially if they have problems and will shift blame to anyone else. Also the community expects me to teach Aboriginal Studies and are shocked when I say another teacher does this ... It does put extra responsibilities on Aboriginal teachers.

Bandura's (2006) theorising on human agency and the attributes of self-reactiveness and self-reflectiveness are evident here as John and Janaya consciously enact their own professional identity, revealing a resilience and determination to achieve their goals. Experiencing agency in the workplace is essential to the development and maintenance of a 'healthy' professional identity (Beijaard, 2006; Ketelaar et al., 2012) and, as power relations essentially create the conditions for agency, it is

encumbent upon the individual to either consciously enact or resist discursive positioning (Zembylas, 2005, p. 938). A working example of this dynamic is the generic labelling of ‘the Aboriginal teacher’ that can result in over-determination of the role (Reid & Santoro, 2006, p. 151). Janaya articulates how she resists this imposed category:

Initially, everyone thinks that because you look Aboriginal that everything that comes out of your mouth is going to be Aboriginal. So what you have to do is take control of that and be judged only by how you speak, act or interact – it is totally up to you...

Bandura’s (2006) intentionality is evident in each participant’s emphasis on improving Aboriginal student outcomes as a key motivating factor for becoming a teacher.

Underpinned by diverse personal biographies, and aspirations grounded in both positive and negative school experiences, the lived experiences of these teachers challenge common perceptions that students become teachers due to their own school success and that all Aboriginal people have only had negative school experiences. Janaya reveals that a particular teacher’s support at school together with experiencing a general sense of belonging in the community (of which the school was a focal point) resulted in largely positive memories of school. Likewise, while John recalls some negative experiences at school, his sporting ability also afforded him some success and enjoyment. Anne, however, recalls:

Someone discovered I was the sister of the ‘darkies’... With the demotion from white to black, came a drastic change in my schoolwork. I went from doing everything my peers were doing, to colouring in all day long.

Despite these early negative experiences, Anne elected to train as a teacher with the intention of making a difference and challenging current practices in Aboriginal education rather than avoiding schools and teachers. In effect, Anne’s decision highlights Bandura’s (2006) domains of forethought and self-reactiveness, which are evident too in both Anne and John’s passion to teach Aboriginal Studies and culture as well as employing social justice and equity principles in their pedagogy. For them, this means empathising not only with Aboriginal students but with other marginalised or disadvantaged students (Santoro & Reid, 2007). Anne proudly recalls working with a difficult student: “I noticed he was good at art, so I let him use his art to describe what he had learnt in class and he loved it ...” Similarly, John is conscious of making a difference through his delivery of curriculum content:

I know I don’t want to give them [students] bad information, you know I want to get the truth out there. For years ... since colonisation we’ve been taught the wrong information when we went to school. I want to stop all that, I want to get the other side out there.

Moreover, all three teachers articulated the importance of building positive relationships with students, and for John this was a key factor in sustaining him throughout a difficult Professional Experience, “... all the kids loved me, and on the last day they gave me presents and everything ... I also got a phone call from a parent saying their kid loved my classes - I went to another level after that”. For her part, Janaya expressed dismay that some teachers feel that building relationships with Aboriginal students means allowing them to get their own way, which she emphasises does not teach consequences nor does it encourage personal responsibility, something she feels is crucial.

What is really annoying is the culture of welfare some members of the school staff create. The kids ask and if they don't get what they want from one staff member, they ask another and usually get things one way or another.

Janaya thus disrupts a common perception that Aboriginal teachers will 'go easy' on Aboriginal students.

Bandura's (2001, 2006) self-reflectiveness is evident in Janaya's observations of the school context and her personal and professional self within this context. As her expressions of Aboriginality are largely tacit - perhaps due to her early socialisation within a distinct cultural milieu - Janaya is able to successfully separate her professional and personal identity to establish credibility as an effective 'mainstream' teacher, without the loss of her Aboriginal identity. Janaya asserts the right to create her own identity as a teacher and harness as much or as little of her Aboriginal identity as she wishes to in response to the socio-cultural context in which she works.

. ...you can be political but you have to do it in a calm way so that it is more effective ... you're professionalism and the reason why you are here is what they are really looking at. ... Even so, my Aboriginality is visible in my lessons, my behaviour, my teaching, relationships and that history is forever with me. My footsteps not only carry me but my family: past, present and future, and especially our culture.

This dynamic is reflected in findings from Meta Harris's research (2005) on black (American) women's autobiographies, which reveals that exploring personal and biographical contexts in relation to wider political, social and cultural contexts provides considerable perspective into how lived experiences shape an individual's responses to diverse situations across personal and professional contexts (p. 39). Harris argues for the right to construct an identity that is not contingent upon the politicisation of ethnicity, but rather, one that is about self and the right to determine what that is.

As a counterpoint to Janaya's experience, Anne's early socialisation was influenced by a lack of knowledge and experience of her culture, heritage and identity. Coupled with perceptions of racism formed during her own education, Anne's formative experiences have manifested into a proactive stance in which Aboriginality has become central to her self-positioning across all contexts. Anne's habitus (Bourdieu, 1997) then, has distinctively influenced her interactions with, and development of staff relationships, which she describes here, "... they didn't like taking advice from an Aboriginal person who they considered of lower status and they feel threatened by Aboriginal teachers coming into the system who would be better at teaching Aboriginal students." For Anne, exercising agency in the workplace means advancing an agenda that in her perception reflects her positioning as an Aboriginal teacher, often in an intransigent way. An incident that clearly demonstrates this tendency occurred when Anne told the principal of her Professional Experience school that they didn't deal with the Aboriginal students appropriately. In Anne's view, the principal's subsequent negative reaction was the result of prejudgement on his part. "...my reputation for questioning schools on Aboriginal issues meant that they were 'wary' of me but I don't apologise for this - I am who I am!" Significantly, Anne's response underlines the distinct patterns of action and perception that characterised her first year of teaching, highlighting the pervasive manner in which individuals act and react in a given situation according their habitus (Hilgers, 2009, p. 731).

Formed through ongoing social interaction, an individual's habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) underpins the way in which they engage in practice, approach workplace problems, and accordingly, exercise agency; which highlights how John is instinctively impelled to draw on his lived experiences to enact agency in his pedagogy and curriculum despite persistent criticism from his cooperating teacher.

I think that my life experiences demonstrate to the kids that because you're not the best student you can still achieve in life. I felt that 'cause of my life and the way I was at school that I could relate to the students and what they were going through, and especially the less academic students. Also, you can talk to some of the subject matter because of your social and work experiences not just theory and stuff. And sometimes you've lived some of those experiences that you're talking about to kids ... She'd [cooperating teacher] say to me 'you are using too much of your personal life to teach.' But I felt that the students related to this more because they could personalise it and they could see the implications of policies and stuff.

Further, John's narrative highlights how making strong emotional connections with students can be a significant source of empowerment for teachers (Zembylas, 2005, p. 944). O'Connor (2008) affirms the importance of the "humanistic nature of the teaching role", citing it as a strong factor in teachers' perseverance in their work, "There is always going to be one [student] who looks at you, and you know that what you're saying is important to them. So you keep on at it – because of, I suppose, this very real shared importance" (p. 122). Very often, it is this 'pedagogical relation' (van Manen, 1994, p.149) that is instrumental to the commitment of Aboriginal teachers in particular, to their work (Santoro, 2006, p. 426).

Crucially, Day & Kington (2008, p.11) argue that the level of a teacher's commitment, job satisfaction, well-being, self efficacy, and perceptions of effectiveness are all mediated by the strength of their sense of agency in their work environment. Beauchamp and Thomas (2011, p.7) suggest that an imposed teacher identity is derived from larger societal and cultural conceptions, and when an individual actively attempts to construct their own identity it invariably produces a dissonance that exhorts the need for agency in those becoming teachers. This is reflected in John's thoughts on his final Professional Experience:

I think that the teacher has a fairly inflexible idea of what makes a good teacher, and while recognising there may be issues or unique circumstances for me as an Aboriginal teacher, she is unable to apply this in a positive way without feeling she has lowered her expectations. She found it hard to support that Aboriginality played a role in teaching style ... she would mark my lesson plans a bit like how you would for a student in your class who had learning difficulties, and I thought that was very degrading. I lost a bit of respect for her and felt I couldn't trust her anymore... maybe she just categorised everything as Aboriginal or not Aboriginal and the Aboriginal thing just blinded her from forming a relationship with me as a student teacher not as an Aboriginal person.

Significant to the development of professional identity is the school context, its socio-cultural predispositions and the way in which teachers respond within this location. Sfard & Prusak's (2005) conceptualise human agency as a product of the confluence (or otherwise) of actual and designated identities illuminates key issues for early career teachers when their designated identities are preconceived and/or imposed. This can often be the case for early career Aboriginal teachers

positioned as 'Other' – which often equates to 'less than' (Reid & Santoro, 2006), and is evident in John's situation:

I remember there was another university student [from the same university] up there, a young girl, and Karen [cooperating teacher] looked after her ... personally I think it was because I came from the Koori Centre and she felt that it was a 'mickey mouse' course. She thought that I was getting the easy ticket through to teaching and everybody else had to do it the hard way.

John's final Professional Experience clearly reflects Sfard and Prusak's (2005) 'critical stories' when John's internal teaching beliefs and perception of his own professional identity were not reflected in the expectations, perceptions and practices of his cooperating teacher. This then negatively impacted on his sense of agency and significantly influenced his decision not to apply for a teaching position.

Additionally, Janaya and Anne expressed strong concerns about externally imposed requirements such as the teacher accreditation process as being particularly burdensome and stressful, and taking crucial time away from lesson preparation and teaching. Janaya explains "...but the amount of administration work ... [such as] the workload from the Institute of Teachers ... is astounding, and it took me a long time to accept it without negativity". Connell (2009, p.226) articulates that such standards reinforce mainstream discursive notions of the 'good teacher', implying that the potential to exercise agency and negotiate a desired professional identity is severely limited within the parameters of these frameworks.

CONCLUSION

The personal, professional and situated identities of early career Aboriginal teachers are as complex and contradictory as for their non-Aboriginal colleagues which can be further complicated by their positioning as an 'Aboriginal teacher' by others. This issue is highlighted in John's Professional Experience where he was automatically positioned by his cooperating teacher as deficient due to the alternative teacher education program he is enrolled in. Finding the balance between being an Aboriginal person and a professional person remains a significant challenge for Aboriginal teachers, one that is strongly influenced by the socio-cultural context of the school. The narratives represented in this study challenged many of the normative discourses around Aboriginal teachers, students and education. The Aboriginal teachers in this study exercised agency in a way that fulfilled their desire to be effective teachers, rather than fulfilling a school's need to have an 'Aboriginal teacher'. Bandura's (2006) four attributes of agency provided a lens through which to view individual expressions of Aboriginality and how they interact with professional identity, thereby illuminating different versions of Aboriginal teacher identity as they emerged through the narratives.

Implications for teacher education, the transition into teaching, and the daily reality of teaching must include explicit discussion of the role of identity formation (personal, professional and situational) and the processes that contribute to this. An understanding of how to negotiate the socio-cultural context of the school including the political processes that are key to daily survival and the enactment of agency within these parameters, is crucial for early career teachers (Day & Kington 2008; Mockler, 2011). A further consideration for early career teachers are the mechanisms of accreditation processes

whereby teacher's work is reduced to definable and measurable skills, rather than the provision of inclusive, socially just, quality education (Mcleod, 2001, p.2). In the interests of developing more relevant and democratic processes for assessing effective teaching, recognising the individualist traits and tacit understandings and knowledges that many teachers bring to their work is critical. This of course does not just concern Aboriginal teachers, rather any teacher with alternative world views, socio-cultural interpretations and teaching practice; teachers described by Sachs (2001, p. 156) as having 'activist professional' identities.

Acknowledging Aboriginal expertise in both teacher education (Santoro et al., 2011) and school contexts has strong potential for contributing to the development of 'healthy' professional identities for preservice Aboriginal teachers. Stewart (2005) identifies the possibility of Aboriginal teachers becoming 'cultural knowledge brokers' as providing real opportunities to develop and enact of agency. However, it must be acknowledged that such possibilities are open to exploitation by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Hence, this knowledge should neither be assumed nor expected. Both Janaya and Anne's narratives reveal the incongruities inherent in such assumptions and expectations. Furthermore, the act of recognising the unique knowledge and skill base of the Aboriginal teacher as valuable and legitimate within a mainstream context not only holds important prospects for empowerment and addressing attrition rates, but carries significant potential for augmenting the social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1997) of Aboriginal teachers individually and Aboriginal people collectively.

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