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Teacher Professional Change at the Cultural Interface: A Critical Dialogic Narrative Inquiry into a Remote School Teacher's Journey to Establish a Relational Pedagogy

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Abstract

This paper is written as a co-constructed narrative between Helen, an early career teacher, Rick an artist and colleague and Kevin, an Aboriginal educator and researcher. They met over a 3-year period from 2012 – 2015 during Kevin's frequent visits to the school, when they talked about their professional and personal lives and the challenges of making a home in a small rural and remote community. These conversations, which commenced from the everyday interactions with students, evidenced an often forlorn and resistance-based co-despondency between the schools' teachers, its students and their families. Helen's professional and personal angst, which was reflective of this larger conflict, highlighted her particular response to this environment and an internalized conflict between her aspirations to be 'a good and effective teacher' and the realities of her actual experiences of becoming a teacher in this rural and remote school.

Bakhtin's notion of 'polyphonic' dialogic narratives (Frank, 2012) provides a methodology that facilitates an expression of the experiences and aspirations of these two teacher participants, exposing both their personal and professional fragilities and their desires to affect a different outcome for their students. In turn, Kevin applies a critical Indigenous methodology that counterposed an alternative, Indigenous understanding to Helen's anxiety about the school, its students and her relationship with the town she wants to call home. This paper focuses on Helen's reflections on her particular efforts to engage her Year 8 music class in the 'alien', remote educational environment in which she found herself.

Keywords: Cultural interface; teacher professional knowledge; teacher change; culturally responsive curriculum; Aboriginal education; remote education; teacher professional learning; dialogic narrative, rural education.

Forward

This paper is written as co-constructed dialogic narratives between Helen, a newly appointed Music and English Teacher to a small, remote K – 12 school in far western New South Wales (NSW), Rick an accomplished artist and art teacher who also taught at the school and Kevin, an Aboriginal educational researcher. All three had met earlier in a project that supported the implementation of the school and Aboriginal community's Paakantyi language program. During 2012, Kevin had the opportunity to socially engage with staff while conducting interviews with both Helen, Rick, other members of schools' teaching staff, the Aboriginal school staff¹ and parents. These interviews were part of a multisite ethnographic research project on the effect on non-Aboriginal teachers' professional knowledge about Aboriginal students through their engagement with Aboriginal families (Lowe, 2017).

Methodology

These teachers and the researcher engaged in these conversations over the course of that year, as they met during the day in the staff common room, or later, when Rick and Helen found time at the end of school, after the students had abandoned their classrooms and the hot afternoon winds formed willie willies that spun up the fine red soil that masqueraded as the school's playground. These conversations, which were largely situated in events of the classroom, frequently commencing out of the '[mis]-behaviour' of students, and the constant struggles that Helen and her fellow colleagues experienced in teaching in this remote western NSW school. Often these moments morphed into dialogues that sought an explanation of the depth of student and community resistance and their own and their colleague's apparent inability to reach out to the students in their classrooms. These dialogic moments shone a light onto the struggles that many teachers, both in Australia and elsewhere have more openly admitted to, once having left these 'undesired' teaching appointments (Harper, 2000; Michie, 2014).

This paper unfolds into a three-way critical reflection on the place of contested and conflicted relationships between teachers and students in this small, hard to staff school, the effect of teachers' limited understanding of the histories and standpoint of its Aboriginal families and the impact of the intergenerational [mis]education of Aboriginal students. To this discussion, Kevin applied a critical Indigenous perspective that sought to examine the pre-suppositions and structures seen as being implicitly embedded in the schools' 'purposefully developed' policies and practices which were meant to support these students' education (Lowe, 2017). The conversations were posed and then parried between the three discussants, opening the possibilities for a reflexive understanding to emerge of the socio-cultural incongruities that imposed themselves into their classrooms (Harrison & Greenfield, 2011). These dialogues were deeply reflexive, as we collectively mused on the nature of schooling, the relevance of teachers' pre and post service training, the inabilities of many of the teachers and students' families to find a common point of interaction, and the frustrations at the constant reproduction of student underachievement.

Dialogic Narrative Inquiry

These conversations, recorded over the course of 2012, were aggregated into a contiguous dialogue and shared between the 3 participants for consideration, when a second phase of dialogic re-interpretation of these discussions took place and where issues were reflexively

1. Aboriginal Education Officers, Language tutors, literacy tutors, home school liaison staff. The term Aboriginal is the one that is used as a generic term that collectively describes the largely Paakantyi and Ngijyambaa peoples who live in this town of 400 people

examined through the lens of hindsight that came through their physical and temporal distance from these events (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007). The common interests between the three discussants moved from the immediacy of Helen's needs to 'survive' her first year of teaching, into broader discussions on matters such as the nature of teaching, Indigenous learner identities, community engagement, schooling success, and the enduring levels of student and teacher resistance (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). The dialogue went back and forth, exploring Helen's professional struggle to be the teacher she had hoped to become, within the wider context of schooling in this community, while Rick's experiences opened the door to another discourse on his contextualised and relational pedagogy that was seen by parents and teachers alike, to positively impact on his students' schooling success (Michie, 2014). These conversations touched on the personal, structural and pedagogic challenges of teaching within a context of rural and remote schools, the historical contexts of schooling Aboriginal students, the causes of resistance among teachers, students and communities and the levels of student underachievement.

This paper has been written primarily in a form that emanates from an Indigenous narrative framework (Yunkaporta & Kirby, 2011), that recognises the legitimacy of these dialogues to capture many of the deep tensions seen to exist in the education of Aboriginal students. The texts of Rick and Helen are italicised to represent their dialogues, while the un-italicised text identifies Kevin speaking directly back to them, or as a commentary on the issues raised. Its dialogic form and structure are based on a reflexive and relational engagement that came from Helen's attempts to seek understanding of the largely normalized resistant relationships between the Aboriginal community and the school.

Context

Kevin: I've looked forward to this opportunity to have these discussions with you both², on your thoughts about how you and your colleagues have settled into teaching in your time at this place, and how their understanding of this has been shaped by the experiences of teaching in this remote school. I'm interested in looking to understand how teachers understand the challenges of being at this school, their pedagogic journey in response to these challenges and the impact of their responses on both yourselves and the students in your care. While your experiences are unique, the convergent trajectories that variously brought you to this place and the similarities in your artistic and professional dispositions, makes your insights of interest in understanding what you see as the particular qualities of a successful teacher of Aboriginal students.

As you know, while I've not worked at this school as teacher, I have collaborated with the staff and the local Aboriginal community in supporting the establishment of the Paakantyi language program. In these, I was party to many discussions with parents who believed the school had many issues that needed to be addressed. These included the impact of teachers' negative perceptions about their children, their failure to engage the students in learning and a view that the staff had little commitment to the town and its community (Lowe, 2017). So, I'm keen to understand how you both come to achieve a level of success not seen by many other staff at the school.

² This concept of a 'yarn' has a long lineage, and as Yunkaporta and Kirby (2011) demonstrated, this a way of co-jointly exploring complex ideas, and see how emerging ideas are shared and understanding can be achieved as a result of this interactional dialogue. Geia et.al (2013) also favoured this research method when using storytelling as a means of legitimating the experiences and knowledge of local Aboriginal people. While neither Rick or Helen are Aboriginal, this methodology has allowed the three participant narratives to be inter-twined as a way to explore the complex themes of being and becoming teachers in the unique location.

Aspirations: Wanting to Be that Teacher

Helen: Well this is an opportunity for me to talk about my last few years teaching here. I can now begin to understand the issues that challenged me in my thinking about how I wanted to construct an effective and purposeful experience in my teaching, and how that would look to both myself and the children I taught. I realise that while this notion of professional fulfilment is very subjective, it is something that many teachers have a common agreement on. Upon reflection of those last 3 years, I believe that my professional fulfilment came through the planning and implementation of thoughtful, engaging lessons that students can embrace, the completed tasks students undertook, and that they are proud of what they have learnt. Further to this, meaning can be defined as lessons that potentially have a long-lasting impact on their lives beyond the classroom.

In late 2010, before accepting my appointment here, I sat and wrote about my own personal teaching philosophy. The last time I had done this was probably about 15 years ago, so it seemed timely to pull this into focus. So, I cryptically wrote that I wanted to:

“Build relationships, cultivate respect, and encourage excellence – for my students; and incorporate inspiration and enthusiasm into my teaching as this ultimately leads to [student] enjoyment. I also acknowledge the importance of ‘knowing’ the subject content – and to use the curriculum to find inspiration and assist in providing clear teaching and learning objectives.”

Looking back on this, I realise how much more committed I am to the central themes of building relationships, knowing the subject material I am teaching, and finding inspiration in what I teach. While this personal definition has not changed much over the past three years, what has changed is my value base. Prior to arriving here, the internal platform from which I implemented this philosophy was deeply shaped by my prior experiences as a musician and music educator. Simply put, I had a belief that ‘everyone can enjoy making music; that all people are capable of being a musician; and, in particular, my delivery of this music education was enough to engage anyone.’

Kevin: You’ve started at an interesting point, a glimpse into the questions that we’ve often asked ourselves and colleagues: What sort of teacher will I be? How do I want to be seen, and what will success as a teacher look like? So, in starting here, you’ve raised many ideas about both those personal aspirations and beliefs that you and most other teachers develop around conceptualisations of their teaching (Lewthwaite, Boon, Webber, & Laffin, 2016). These appear to focus on issues such as the construct of the student, the imagined fears and desires of geographic locations, and looking to ‘educate’ the Aboriginal student such that they can ‘overcome’ the deficit – of both being Aboriginal and from living in a remote, rural and isolated space (Comber & Kamler, 2004; Guenther, 2013)³.

Earlier, you articulated how you wanted to see yourself, the confidence you had in your teaching, and your desire to impact the education of the students. You know, to many Aboriginal people, teachers and other outsiders appear to have limited understanding of these communities into which they are parachuted, and where Aboriginal peoples’ lives are juxtaposed against standards, beliefs and attitudes that normalise the western and urban spaces from which teachers are drawn. In this, knowing the ‘Aborigine’ is constructed of ‘book’ knowledge, hopefully well-meaning but often out of touch and consequently providing few skills to flourish in these spaces

³ Both Comber and Kamler and Guenther both identify the negative effect that teachers’ deficit theorising has on their capacity to culturally and pedagogically engage with students from cultural minority groups. Additionally, Guenther’s research with schools in the Northern Territory demonstrated an additional impact of teachers’ negative understandings of Aboriginal students living in remote locations

(Pohlhaus, 2002). Too often the initial enthusiasm of teachers is all too quickly replaced by a crippling disillusionment about the school, the students and their communities.

The difficulty for a community like this, whose schools have experienced the consequences of being a revolving door for the rapidity of teachers “comings and goings”, is that they are constantly having to work, understand and engage with these new teachers whose beliefs, fears, and levels of cultural dissonance with the community, negatively impacts on student achievement (Comber & Kamler, 2004). I would think that these experiences have identified how teachers’ professional views of these schools are constructed from ignorance about their students’ capacity, the imagined negative influence of parents, and their own lack of connection to the location into which they have been parachuted (Guenther, 2013; Comber, 2004). But – in the midst of this, there are those few teachers who challenge these deeply situated deficit ‘mis-understandings’ of rural life and of Aboriginal communities and their aspirations, of ‘black’ culture, of student capacity and the parent interest in their kids’ futures (Yunkaporta & Kirby, 2011).

So, the question that we are skirting around is: Are teachers destined to repeat the experiences of those who have ventured into these towns before them, or are there ways that we are better able to assist them, to develop the broad pedagogic capacities that will have an educational impact?

Schooling: Responses to the Practice of Schooling

Helen: These were the very issues that transfixed me when I arrived at the school and steeled myself as I prepared my first lesson for a group of Year 8 students. However, as much as I wanted this to work, my hopes and expectations about this educational and cultural undertaking were tested. Lesson after lesson, I came away feeling confused, frustrated, clumsy, alienated and isolated from these students.

I continued to ‘operate’ completely from within my ‘lens of comfort and protection’ for some time, before one day realising I had tried every ‘trick’ and strategy I could think of. This point of despair was a culmination of weeks of battling largely on my own, initiating half successful behaviour management strategies. I had attempted having both humorous and humourless encounters, attempted engagement through listening to music, improvisation, and often just standing there and watching the dynamic occurring between this small group of mostly Aboriginal students around me. I even resorted to really outrageous engagement strategies such as presenting content using postmodern theatre language performance techniques, movements and props in my attempts to steal my students away from the constantly disengaging conversations they had with peers and their resultant resistance to learning. In this I played the actor where I played the outrageous performer, desperately seeking their attention to draw them into the lesson I was yearning to present but couldn’t. They weren’t interested and I didn’t seem to have the skills to create it.

My one point of sanity in these early days was the company of Rick, the other Creative Arts teacher at the school, who taught three days a week in the room adjacent to mine. I walked into my colleague’s classroom after one such lesson – I was mentally exhausted and was lacking a sense of self-worth. I just blurted out ‘these kids just don’t want to learn from me, they don’t believe they are musicians and they’re not interested in trying anything I present to them.’

He just looked at me. In his ten years of teaching art at the school, he had over time drawn these children into his art world, finding ways to get them to open up and express themselves through the visual arts. I had become fascinated and at times envious of the work he seemed to be able to get his students to produce, and the connection he had with them.

Rick: Look ... I could see that Helen – like many [teachers] before her, was really hurting, shattered in fact. So, while I'm very happy to share my thoughts when asked, I didn't want to appear to push a view that has come from my own, unique experiences as a teacher and artist... I could see that she was clearly a person who was very keen on excelling in any every part of her life. One of the things I did remember on one occasion saying: "look you're thinking too much like a teacher and not enough like a musician". I remember this comment appeared to strike her deeply – she understood what I was saying. The thing about Helen was that she always understood that if I was going to be critical there was a reason - that there was a positive reason ... So, to be that teacher she aspired to be – she needed to demonstrate her passion for what she was teaching – its inner purpose. Educating these kids can't occur unless you can convey that!

Kevin: Before going on, can we talk about something that you have both alluded to – which was the place of the curriculum and its promise of being the safe haven from which you [Helen] could legitimate your teaching. But, Rick, on the other hand you argue that if curriculum is implemented uncritically then it's in-fact a barrier to engagement and learning for students who are culturally marginalised (McFadden & Munns, 2002; Munns, Martin, & Craven, 2008).

Helen: Yeah, well ... to this point I had always seen myself as 'Helen the schoolteacher', a separate and parallel role that was somewhat divorced from my own reality and knowing. Playing out the 'script' learnt from my own very different experiences and which generally supported the curriculum and those pedagogic practices that had previously worked for me and my colleagues, and which were broadly supported by the Department (of Education). What constituted the general consensus was the often-ill-considered views of my similarly inexperienced colleagues, the principal, and school executive, most of whom were themselves in their first decade of teaching and/or first promotion position. But, I just knew that this just wasn't working for me or the students!

Rick: Look... most teachers we get here are terrific; they all bring different insights - but in general when we transfer [as many of these young teachers do] from the coast or from Sydney, are culturally confronted with another, quite foreign culture that is a world away from what they know, favour and can engage with.... and that's really the issue.

We're 1100 kms from Sydney but it's more than distance, there's a different way of seeing things – and a big part of that is our cultural impoverishment. But, in other ways it can be a huge relief from the gravity of cultural self-importance that you find attached to that [metropolitan] space. Largely, these places are representative of the dominant culture; that values and normalises white middle or upper-class values and beliefs. It's from these environments, where the myths and perspectives are spawned about Aboriginal people and remote places. These were told and re-told among teachers, perpetuating an 'encultured education system' that was representative of their own worldviews. It is through this myopia that the ideal of schooling success is constructed. So, it's little wonder that these young teachers encounter an absence of 'the city' when they journey here... and although the syllabus [or curriculum] is well thought out, young teachers often feel as though they don't know how to use the syllabus, they feel used by the syllabus - that [feel] they have to deliver this syllabus and the kids don't want it.

Kevin: I wonder Helen how you feel about Rick's commentary on the inherent dissonances between Aboriginal people and the mandated curriculum, and what you were seeing and experiencing at school? In part Rick's comments seems to touch on deep questions of the relevance and transparency of schooling situated knowledge (Austin & Hickey, 2011; Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2007) and indeed, questions whether schools have the capacity to be responsive to local contexts (Vass, 2017).

Helen: I initially didn't have this understanding but what I did have was a growing angst that came with the daily reminder of my 'professional' impotence in the classroom, which drove me to re-orientate my thinking about what and for whom I was teaching. It was then that I changed my focus, and I began to implement the planning strategies that I had developed and successfully used as a community music educator. Early in my time here I had training in the roll out of the Quality Teaching Framework⁴ initially from the in-school supervisor and then with the support of a university mentor employed by the school. Reading this document for the first time made me excited as I had a new language to describe what was necessary in my practice as a teacher. 'Draping' my planning, lessons, and assessment over this framework contributed significantly in enabling me to reconceptualise who Helen the educator was.

In the beginning, I asked myself questions that critically challenged my own self-concept. Thinking back now, I wanted to focus on four questions: What have I learnt so far about my students? I wanted to reflect on their cultural, social, academic, intellectual and emotional contexts. Following on from that, I considered: What do students already know? Then I would ask myself: What do they need and how could I possibly give it to them? And finally, I challenged myself by asking, How do I make this teaching into an authentic quality learning experience? It was from these questions that I was felt enabled to design my first teaching program specifically for these students, called "The Muso Inside You – expressing the power", which finally saw us turn into a class of learners.

Kevin: Both of you have introduced some unique, self-learnt concepts that touch on some key issues for teachers, such as to whether teachers can effect professional change through peer supported mentoring and teacher reflexivity? (Pohlhaus, 2002) It's interesting that you spoke of being unable to move forward until you challenged your own bounded ideas about what was 'good teaching.' You described that moment as being when this 'understanding' was first made known to you. How difficult was this?

Helen: You know, I felt that I was taking a big risk at this point. I had to step out of what I had found had always worked for me, both in the type and delivery of content. I had to admit to myself that it was a possibility that when my students were repeatedly saying "Miss this is boring, this is shit, I don't understand, I don't want to do this" or behaving in an utterly passive but non-compliant manner – that from their rational perspective, there was a stark truth in these challenging statements.

It was scary, because I felt as though I was 'giving in' to my students' tantrums around not wanting to work or do the work. And if I gave in now, was I ever going to have 'control' in my classroom with them again?

Kevin: This question of the teachers' 'management' and control of the 'abhorrent' behaviour of students, is seen as central to their 'worthiness' and professional status. However, this could also be characterised within a counter discourse, one of student agency, where Aboriginal students enact a collective resistance to teachers, the school and even to schooling more generally (Marker, 2009). On the one hand, the issue of behaviour is seen to create an adverse environment that impacts on students' learning, while for many Aboriginal families, their child's resistance is identified as legitimate, the outcome of their own and their families' intergenerational disconnection from the classroom (Gray & Beresford, 2001; Osborne, 2014). While ever this disconnect remains in place, this socially constructed conundrum, of teachers' management of behaviour will be at odds with students' enacting their agentic resistance to a curriculum and those connected teaching practices that fail to resonate with their needs or aspirations. But for you both It appears that this realisation of realities, consequently opened the possibility for the

⁴ A holistic professional learning model supported by the NSW Dept of Education.

construction of a new pedagogy that situated learning in local contexts, was cultural relevant, that acknowledged student agency and required high teacher and student expectations.

Release: A Way Forward

Helen: I felt that if I changed the formula there would be anarchy [in the classroom] and that I would lose what little respect the students had in me. How would I be able to work in such an environment if this is what could happen? This was a moment of great self-doubt – to stay with something that patently didn't work – or striking out, but with the prospect of failure!

I was mulling over this unit “The Muso Inside You – expressing the power”, which I knew was far from directly addressing the Years 7-8 Music syllabus outcomes. I hadn't gone to the syllabus and taken a ‘suggested topic’ such as ‘Rock Music’ or ‘Medieval Music’ and written or borrowed a traditional unit of work to ‘execute’. What I did was put my students squarely into the centre of my planning process and in answering my ‘big’ questions, I came up with content and an implementation strategy that would meet the students at their point of learning. Looking through my Teacher's eyes, it was difficult for me to articulate how this program would be seen to ‘close the learning gap’, as it was articulated within ‘government policy’. But what I did do was provide lots of practical hands on activities and opportunity for student reflection, discussion and best of all –engagement in their own learning. Where once these students had sought to outdo each other with their antics of resistance and non-compliance, they now sought to actively participate in this new experience of being a participant if not an active partner in their own-guided learning.

I was beginning to understand the person I had been – that teacher who was fearful of letting go the control over curriculum and pedagogic practice – I now understood that I needed to remind myself that this was about the students; that I needed to listen, respectfully, to the ways they communicated their feelings, and evaluate our collective progress after each lesson. Lastly, I needed to practice just being with my students, with their variable moods on any given day and knowing that I didn't need to always immediately ‘find a solution’ to how they were expressing themselves or behaving.

Kevin: This concept of a shared leadership with students to provide meaningful input into the development of the learning is interesting. For many teachers, this would be anathema, for success is measured by their management of the curriculum, of student leaning and measures of external assessment (Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2014). Yet what you were suggesting is in this space, and from your interactions with students, you sought to develop a new context focused framework for learning. This new position sounds like what Nakata identified as the ‘cultural interface’ where the collision or interactions of contested knowledges and histories can facilitate a new body of rich and inclusive knowledge being constructed (Nakata, 2007). Is this what you are thinking?

Rick: ... The relationship between my life as an artist and my life as a teacher – are significant and closely linked. I view the classroom as a creative zone, a studio. I don't teach students, I teach artists; I teach creative young creative human beings and it is that creativity that is the core of learning and the approach I take to their learning. When the subject is separated from this story of its creative agency or its impetus then we would not even be seeing the target - I suppose I see education as not something I put into the kid's world but is it me drawing out their genius that their ancestors have handed to them – [I believe that] we all have an endless and incredibly long string of ancestors who have lived and struggled - have developed humour, stories and ingenious solutions to difficulties. In these moments we worked to find unique solutions to the issues that were raised in the classroom.

Epiphany: Taking Stock

Helen: My moment of epiphany and subsequent professional fulfilment did not happen in isolation as I had much to learn from Rick, as a mentor and colleague. He has been teaching visual arts at the school for some 10 years, while also being an active producer of art himself. He and his students were producing amazing results, in an educational environment where they took ownership over both the creation of work within their own unique visual style, free of 'shame'. Thinking about the significance of his support through the countless hours of conversations, my vicarious observation of his lessons and how his pedagogic practices encouraged me to follow through bravely on my ideas for education in this setting – using intuition, reflection, quality teaching, over and over again, with increasing courage.

Through example, and constantly reminding myself to listen to my students, and not to personalise their behaviour, I found strength. He inspired me to take risks with my teaching style, and to put my students at the centre of my planning. How did this happen? When I learnt to actively listen to the students, through sharing personal and professional stories of breakthrough moments, and through discreetly observing his lessons.

The other significant 'narrative' in all this was the need to find a connection with home - to my students' families. I figured out early on, the difficulty in finding a connection between school and home. My perception was that the two were separate and my experience was that engaging parents was particularly challenging. I knew that this was crucial to the success of what I could see my students experiencing and was aware of the history of disconnection between the school, families and the wider community. I supposed that if their parents knew what learning was occurring, then the experiences of the students would be more empowering and motivating.

Kevin: One of the other significant issues or challenges, is to question the underlying assumptions that are often used by schools and their systems when speaking of these partnerships in terms of the schools building or enhancing community capacity. This is described in terms of 'fixing a capacity' or of community deficit, but is it better to conceptualise this as an issue of school and teacher's capacity that needs to be mentored and supported (Yunkaporta & Kirby, 2011).

Rick: Yeah, you know - I spent the first few years here - building relationships, just being another human being; not being just another teacher who comes and goes and does the job of introducing white fella ideas in a white fella way and being a missionary for the middle class which so often happened because a lot of teachers come from a middle-class background. They are shocked at some of the things that are either here or aren't here. It's a kind of really deep cultural collision for many teachers.

Kevin: Your observation of the impact of the cultural disconnection of teachers from the students and the community, gives us some deeper insights into the wider socio-political contexts of schooling, especially in locations such as this (Green, 2008). Few teachers if any, acknowledge that the impact of their pedagogy implicitly places them at the sharp end of the long-term colonising project which has constantly looked to diminishing if not expunging the legitimacy of Aboriginal presence, or connection to Country (Bradley & Yanyuwa families, 2010). Often this task of schools is masked within unproblematised curriculum discourses of national cohesion, or 'Australian' identity, multiculturalism and nation making (Maxwell, Lowe, & Salter, 2018).

Helen: In retrospect, [it was] my passionate and possibly needy desire to connect as a dweller and educator in this town that probably gave the community more than one good laugh. But it did happen. I learnt how to enjoy making fun of myself, through performance as a songwriter, which provided a public platform in which I could expose my fears and actions. And I gradually became more comfortable within the community. Though I never claimed to fully 'know' these people who live here, my relationships reached a point where it visibly enhanced my

connections with my students: learning about their 'place' in respect to how and to whom they were related in this close-knit community – this was priceless information that helped me appreciate the depth of their multi-layered 'connection' to kin and Country. But in coming to learn this, helped me to learn how to be myself and to know what an effective educator could possibly look like.

Kevin: The pressures of being posted to schools such as you have described can in many cases weigh heavily on young inexperienced teachers. For many these experiences are filled with a terror that comes with being out of our relational comfort zone, and the realisation of the professional failure of knowing that students' underachievement has continued under their watch (Sleeter, 2008).

Helen: There are without doubt more difficult and challenging educational contexts to work in, but it was tough enough, as I have described. The relentless pressure of the situation I found myself dealing with on a daily basis caused me to train my focus increasingly on what it was in my work as a teacher that I could find freedom and fulfilment in. I had a goal, and my goal was: What is it that I, as a teacher, need to do in this school to manifest real learning?

Perhaps this is the single most valuable tool I came away with in learning what the questions were that I needed to ask, and then asking them. In other words, that to set myself up for success as a teacher, I needed to have a goal that I knew I had a chance of achieving.

Conclusion: Towards a Critical Pedagogy of Change

What has been described within these reflexive narratives illuminates the discursive experiences of these two teachers living in this rural township. These narratives are if nothing else, evidence of the challenges that teachers face on a day-to-day basis, and impact of the often-simplistic reductionist conceptualisations of 'educating' Aboriginal children—in this case set in the context a rural community 1100km from the capital – views that reside deeply in the professional knowledge, beliefs and practices of teachers.

Neither Rick or Helen set out with the intention of questioning the educational structures that facilitated, or indeed legitimated the levels of intergenerational underachievement of their students. Yet, Helen's journey towards becoming the teacher that she had aspired, meant that by necessity she needed to question key areas of her professional practice. Helen's professional trajectory towards her epiphany, could not have been achieved without first challenging that knowledge and practice that she and the profession had valorised within its own self-actualised construct of "the good teacher".

What was evidenced in these two interlinked narratives was that both Rick and Helen realised that the classroom was the primary site of conflict, the place where the asymmetrical relationships of the power held by this school was enacted by its teaching staff on these Aboriginal students. At its heart, the classroom became the place for this existential conflict between the Aboriginal students and their white, middle-class, culturally ignorant and Eurocentric teachers. This conflict juxtaposed the students' efforts to challenge the controls over their identities, the school's ignorance of 'local' knowledge, and the effect of these students' connectedness to family and Country, to their overall socio-cultural well-being. It was of little surprise then, that schools continue a practice of schooling that looks to assimilate the Aboriginal child and that furthers their marginalisation from that which is their unique heritage. Rick the insider - outsider understood this tension at play when he looked into Helen's classroom.

In a sense, these dialogic narratives can be too easily read as being representative of a false locational, experiential and/or relational binary so often represented in the professional repertoires of teachers and school systems when talking about working in these remote schools.

In constructing this false idyll of ‘teacher’, ‘teaching’ and ‘country’, Helen was ignorantly entering this contested space of schooling the ‘black child’, where none of her beliefs or pedagogic tools appeared relevant to her classroom. The starkness of this remote space makes this drama bleaker in that both student resistance and teacher responses were normalised by both players in this drama. In this, the unspoken narratives of Helen’s students can be unambiguously understood, for their actions were a response to a history of education that blatantly failed to meet their needs. Their resistance was to teachers and an education system that they and their families understood had as its purpose, to distance them from that which is critical to their identity as an Aboriginal person. In this, the ‘rural and remote’ is not just a geographical context, but both a place and space of contestation and epistemic collision in which it took the disruption to Helen’s pedagogic beliefs through her epiphany in becoming ‘human’, that turned her experience of this intergenerational struggle into a positive learning event for both her and the Year 8 students.

The rendering of these narratives, sheds light on the nature and importance of student engagement and its ability to construct the possibilities for different learning relationships to be established. Further, they demonstrated that in the making of these classroom environments, teachers are enabled to establish a deeper, contextual understanding about students, their aspirations for success, and for teachers to support students’ educational resilience in the classroom. Thirdly, the narratives speak to the question of teachers having to own the learning space, and to challenge the unquestioned capacity of curriculum to support quality learning for all students. This leads to the last finding, which was that Helen’s ‘epiphany’ was the realisation that she needed to engage students on their terms—on their Country, in their cultural space, and with their accompanying identities. In liberating them from the consequential effects of resistance, she enabled herself to see another future. Rick spoke to her of freeing herself of the restraints of an unrealisable curriculum and a pedagogy that courted an ever-present circle of classroom conflict. She tentatively moved to co-construct a classroom that was receptive to her students’ educational aspirations, their cultural positioning and relational needs. As Helen acknowledged, this “awakening” was the catalyst she had needed to challenge the normalised certitudes of teachers’ beliefs in this rural setting, a position that had tethered her and her colleagues to a pedagogy of failure. These tensions had the potential for professional inertia. However, Helen took the challenge and ventured, with her colleague’s support on a professional journey towards becoming that teacher she aspired to be. Her angst morphed, through a process of deep reflexivity, towards the path of a responsive pedagogy that centred her ‘rurally’ located Aboriginal students in the learning.

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